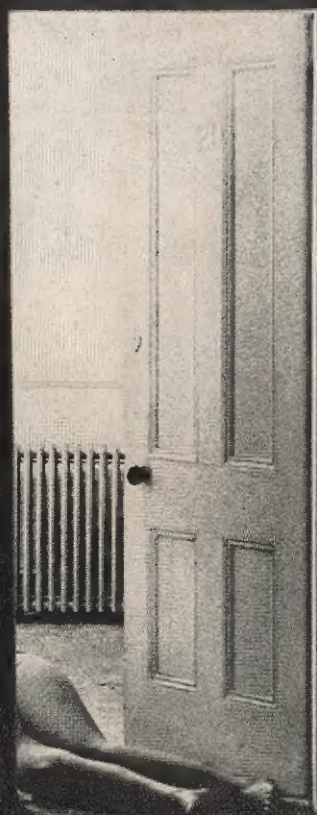


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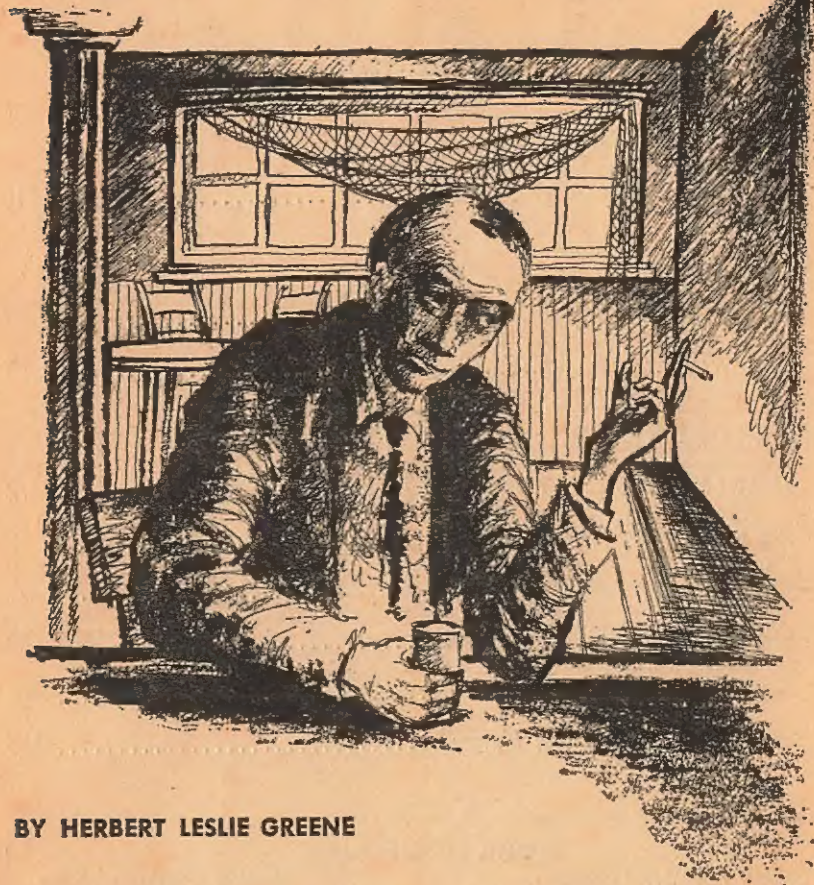
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MANHUNT VOLUME 12, NUMBER 5, September, 1964. Single copies 50 cents. Subscriptions, \$3.00 for 6 issues in the United States and Possessions; elsewhere \$4.00 (in U.S. Funds) for 6 issues. Published bi-monthly by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., 545 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10017. Telephone MU 7-6623. Second Class Postage paid at New York, N. Y., and at additional mailing offices. The entire contents of this issue are copyright 1964 by Flying Eagle Publications, Inc., under the International Copyright Convention. All rights reserved under Inter-American Copyright Convention. Title registered U.S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts and drawings if return is desired, but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited materials. Manuscripts and art work should be sent to Manhunt, 545 Fifth Avenue, New York, N. Y. 10017. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in U. S. A.

DEATH BEGINS...



BY HERBERT LESLIE GREENE

His fortieth birthday depressed him. He felt somehow he was dying. The loud, garish blonde seemed a desperate last chance.



IT WAS a wretched and desperate feeling to be forty, when once you were twenty. So much was different now, so much. He watched the blonde at the other end of the bar and he was revolted by her, yet he wanted her, and there was no logic in this. When he was twenty he would have spit on her, but he was forty and he would give his

blood for one beckoning smile from her.

She was heavily curved, big and soft, with bleached near-white hair and sun-red skin. She was down from the city for a vacation in the small sea-side resort town, and she sat her stool and dominated the bar-room by the mere fact of her lush being. Her laughter was shrill, her

voice loud. A juke-box pounded away behind her and her movements were unconsciously tuned to the riot of sound out of it.

She had been in town only a few days. He had arrived a short time before her, with his family. He saw her often for he was often in the bar. Since his fortieth birthday a week ago, he had been strangely moody, depressed, sad. He observed himself in so many new ways and what he saw was fearful. He was dying. The years were going. His wife, his son, settled in the cheap bungalow up the street, were as strangers to him since he was forty. So much was changed. So much.

He smoked and drank and stared at the blonde, with bar flies sucking around her. It was the middle of the week and there were not many citizens in the place. He stared and, of course, she became aware of him. She gravitated toward male attention with a sure instinct. He could see she was not young and, from the almost desperate scrape of her laughter, it was evident that she could see it too. But she was younger than he, and she was new to the place and bright and alive. She was mistress of the room and the few men in there scampered about her, cavorting in a nearly obscene charade on a sawdust stage. He watched, was revolted, yet he hungered. And she was aware of him.

She left her stool finally and eased down the bar toward the la-

dies room behind him. She passed close to him and he could smell the blatant perfume she wore. He looked into her eyes as she passed, held her gaze, smiled slowly. She casually returned the smile and, when she emerged a few moments later, he was ready as she knew he would be.

"You oughta try the booze down this end."

"What?"

"The booze down this end." He swallowed, grinned what had been a charming grin for many years, but he was forty and it faltered.

"What about it?" There was a trace of irritation in her high voice.

"Lemme buy you a drink." He was unsure, nervous. He hated her.

"Why dontcha come on over and get into the gang?"

"I don't like gangs."

"What do ya like?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you." It was becoming easier. The charm still flowed. He was alive. Living.

"I was with them guys." She nodded at the two rummies at the other end who were already absorbed in a fat brunette, mother of four and another regular in there.

He shrugged. "If that's your idea of fun."

She moved closer. "I got no idea of fun. I'll try anything. What's your idea of fun?"

Another shrug. "A drink. To start."

"To start what?" Her archness sickened him.

"Sit down and we'll see."

She sat and he ordered her a drink. Her presence flooded his senses. It was difficult to speak, but he had to speak, he had to keep up the chatter, play the game. "You really light up the joint, you know?"

"Sure I do."

"Sure you do. Let me welcome you to town, if no one else has thought to."

"Oh yeah, I been welcomed. But you can keep this burg. It's a drag. How can ya stand it?"

He laughed. "Sometimes I wonder."

"Your wife must like it, huh? And maybe your six kids?"

"Just one kid. You can see I'm an honest man. I tell nothing but the truth. A wife and a kid. Love 'em both."

"Then what are ya doin' buyin' liquor for a strange dame? Why ain't ya home with the wife and kid?"

"I love 'em but I just can't stand 'em." They both laughed. He signaled for more drinks and the talk came easier as the liquor disappeared. He felt surer, stronger, younger. The juke-box blared away and the room seemed to become dense and distant beyond the perimeter of the two of them. Then he felt her knee against his and he was shaken as he had not been for years. He was close to her. Her face seemed smooth, pretty. "It's hot as hell in here," he said, his voice

edged with his feeling. "What we oughta do is, maybe, take a walk. It's a great night out."

"Take a walk where?" Her lips were red and moist.

"Out on the beach, maybe. Where it's deserted and dangerous and where anything might happen. See, I'm still honest. Anything might happen."

"Is that a promise?" They laughed again, long and loud. And now the eyes of the others were on them. He felt tall and confident. "It's a promise," he assured her and he placed his fingers on her soft thigh.

She seemed to melt toward him, her eyes swimming. "Can ya get a bottle?"

A thought of the household budget drifted through his mind, shoes for his son. "I can get anything," he replied.

"Oh yeah?" She giggled this time and stood up. "Oh yeah?"

They left the bar and wandered slowly along the boardwalk. He was shaking, actually shaking, from the nearness of her. He put his arm about her and she flowed against him, soft, so soft. The smell of her clogged his brain. They talked, meaningless, seductive talk, and they laughed.

He led her onto the sand and at once she removed her shoes. He tightened his grip on her, his heart pounding, pounding like a boy's. He felt like a boy. They passed the bottle back and forth. A light wind

drifted in from over the still water, cooling them. "It's nice out here," she stated.

"It sure is." He kissed her, his mouth clumsy on hers, missing her lips, smearing across her cheek. She giggled and spun away. He reached for her but she ran along the moon-white beach, a big, bouncing, laughing woman.

He caught her and they kissed long and deeply. He was trembling when she moved from him. He put his hand on her breast and she giggled again, twisted away. "Gimme the bottle, ya hog!" He watched her gulp the whiskey, saw her throat work, her breasts heave. "Let's sit down for awhile," he said, almost pleading.

"I don't wanna sit down, I wanna walk in the sand!" She hurried off, in a perverted skip, kicking up sand. He followed, his eyes on her round body, her light skin and hair. He gripped her arm finally and pulled her to him. His mouth sought hers but she struggled away, giggling constantly. "Oh no, oh no . . ."

"What do you mean 'Oh no'?" He attempted to match her tone. "Come on, let's sit down."

"I don' wanna. I been sittin' in that goddam gin-mill all night. I wanna move. I didn' come out here to sit on my ass."

"Well, what did you come out here for?"

"You said you wanted to walk, so we'll walk."

"We can sit for a little while."

"Later. We'll sit later. I wanna walk."

He followed her. The beach was wide and deserted, scatterings of shrub and clusters of stone interrupted the vast whiteness of the sand. "Come on," he urged finally. "Please."

"So alright, let's sit down." She was one big pout as she flopped beside him. She placed her chin firmly on her fist and asked, "So now what?" He tried to kiss her but she pulled away. "Oh, stop!"

"What do you mean 'Stop'?"

"I mean stop. You wanted to sit, so we sit."

"What are you sore about?"

"I'm not sore, you want to sit, we sit. Don't start gettin' wise."

"Getting wise?"

"Just what I said."

"Oh, come on now."

"Come on, hell! We sit."

"I didn't come out here to just sit."

"Neither did I. And I didn' come out here to do what you got in mind."

"Oh, it's a big surprise, huh?"

"Yeah, it is. You said ya wanted to walk."

"Oh, come on!"

"Come on yourself. You said ya wanted to walk."

"What are you doing, playing games?"

"I ain' playin' games. You're playin' games."

"Look, I bought a bottle . . ."

"I never asked ya to buy a bottle."

"Like hell you didn't . . . I!"

"You callin' me a liar? I don' hafta take that crap!"

He swallowed, sick with fury. Yet he heard himself say, "Alright, I'm sorry. I didn't call you a liar. I'm sorry."

"Alright."

They sat. She gazed serenely off over the water and he dug holes in the sand between his feet. Then he took her hand and pressed a hurried, frantic kiss on it. "I think we better go back," she muttered and started to rise.

He held tightly on her hand. "Aww don't, stay a little while, just a little while . . ."

"I don' wanna." He put his hands on her, burrowed his face into her throat. She pulled away. "Stop it!"

"Come on . . ."

"Don' be like a animal!"

He stared at her, suddenly conscious of the sight of himself. "An animal?"

"Yeah! Yeah, a animal. That's all ya can think about."

"Why did you come out here?"

"I felt like it."

"You knew I'd make a try at you. And you wanted me to."

"Alright. So I changed my mind." She was on her feet, brushing off sand, straightening her clothing.

"Changed your mind. Just like that." The waves slapped almost listlessly at the shore.

"Yeah, just like that!"

"Who the hell do you think you are?"

She spun on him. "And who the hell do ya think YOU are? What, do ya think you're Rock Hudson or somebody?"

"No, I don't think I'm Rock Hudson."

"Boy, you guys kill me! I try to be pleasant and right away ya start gettin' ideas."

"Pleasant!"

"Yeah, pleasant! I happen to be a pleasant person. Ya wanta screw around so bad, why aintcha home with your wife?"

He stood, glared at her broad face. "Look, just watch it."

"Yeah, you watch it! And that's all you're gonna do, watch it. You ain' gonna lay a hand on it! Not a goddam hand!"

"You bitch."

Her reply was a shriek. "Who the hell are ya callin' bitch? Who the hell are you to call me a bitch? Why you dirty old degenerate! Lookit ya! Where you come off thinkin' ya can score with a girl so damn easy? Lookit ya! You're a fat, bald, old man! A fat, bald, old man!"

He felt his stomach move within him, his head pound. "Shut up!"

"Dirty ol' bastard! Ya oughta be home with your wife 'stead of layin' around bar rooms eyeballin' young girls! You're all the same down here! Dirty ol' bastards! A girl can even be pleasant . . ."

"Shut up."

"A decent girl ain' safe anyplace, anymore. Gotta fight off animals like you, alla time . . ."

"I'm no animal!"

"Crawlin' around after young girls. Your goddamn wife is probly all dried out . . .!"

He grabbed her throat with both hands in a sudden, convulsive gesture. She gasped and they struggled, falling finally onto the sand. He felt his fingers leave her throat, move down over her big, soft body. "You bitch!" he snarled, and in a moment she was growling, "Well, give it to me, goddam it, give it to me!" And he was deep into her flesh and smell, deep and lost, but only for a savage instant, one instant, no more.

She rolled away, got to her hands and knees, ponderous, trembling. "What did ya do to me? What did ya do to me?"

"I'm sorry . . ." He sat there, weak, drained, while she crawled about, cursing him in a vicious monotone.

At last she rose up, screeching, "Ya raped me, you rotten old man! You rotten old man! You'll pay! You'll pay!" And she ran off, toward the boardwalk, screaming, "Rape! Rape!"

He sat alone, conscious of the endless silence once her voice had faded. He wanted to vomit desperately, but was unable to, then he wanted to weep and that, also, was

impossible. All he could seem to think about with any real clarity, was the shoes he had planned to buy for his son. The boy would have to wait now. He would have to wait . . .

She returned soon with the police. She was sobbing grievously now, heart-rendingly. He was dragged to his feet and one of the policemen backhanded him across the mouth, hissing, "You dirty sonofabitch!"

They dragged him back over the sand, to where the lights were and the already-formed, curious crowd. He began to whimper as they reached the boardwalk. He covered his face as best he could for he was afraid that his son might be there somewhere, staring with the rest. The word moved quickly through the crowd and soon they were cursing him as the policeman had done and he moved through it, toward the police car, with his head down.

The woman staggered along behind him, whimpering her shame and outrage and upon her the crowd looked with sympathy and understanding. She had been ravished, spoiled, her life was ruined. There was another car waiting for her. The crowd watched her go, shaking their heads, grumbling.

The sirens reached up into the night, faded slowly. Then they were gone and the crowd dispersed, moved off, back to their lives.



dead ringer

BY JERRY NEWMAN



It was Grafton's toughest job. It may have been his last.

THE thing about Grafton, he never used the same method twice. They say it got to be a sort of mania with him. They say the first job he was hired to do, he used his hands—plain and simple, around the neck. Only of course it was a woman that time, some dame that Tony Avarice was tired of and felt guilty about ditching so he hired Grafton to get rid of her. Strangling with your bare hands would work okay on a dame, but if you were a small guy like they say Grafton is, you wouldn't want to depend on it too often. Anyway, he made a bad mistake right there, his first job out: using his bare

hands, he didn't figure they could lift fingerprints from someone's flesh, but they did, all right. Lucky for him that was the first time he was operating, so the cops had nothing on him. Also, nobody around that scene knew anything about him; seems he had arrived mysteriously one day from somewhere out West and was just starting to work in with the local boys. Only that made him shy, that first mistake. And he only got about five hundred for the job. So he figured he better change his name and clear out to some other parts.

So the next time he worked, about three months after that, he

was a lot more cagey. He got out of the States and came up to Montreal, Canada, where there was a lot of middle—rate stuff going on just then, and the local boys were making it mostly on muscle and a lot of sloppy jobs they came out ahead on strictly according to percentage: you pull ten jobs, no matter how bad you are, the cops are only going to catch you on five or six at best.

Anyway, Grafton came up to Montreal and changed his name, though nobody never believed that Grafton was his real name in the first place. There were a lot of rumours going around about him. There usually is about his kind—hired killers, I mean, loners, guys who don't seem to get any sort of pleasure out of the things other folks enjoy. Besides, there was the fact that nobody, once he left that town where he did his first job, ever saw Grafton again. I mean, nobody who knew what he made his living at. I don't know how he worked it, how he got his jobs and got paid and everything, but he usually had contacts, and nobody I know of ever tried to welch on him. I guess the fact that they didn't know who he was and when he might sneak up on them if they chiselled him made them pay up on time, all the time. Except for that last job, of course, which was a different matter altogether.

Anyway, what I'm getting at, there was good reason for people

to talk about Grafton, even people in the trade theirself, who might be supposed to be used to pros. And one thing Grafton was for sure, a pro. I was saying about how he never used the same method twice.

The second job he was on, Ronnie Ehrlich had been crossed by one of his jockeys that used to ride at *Royal Raceways*. What this jockey did that he wasn't supposed to I'd rather not say because it would give the *Raceways* a little worse reputation than it already has and maybe get me in a little more hot water than I can actually use right now, but this much I will say, what this jockey did cost Ronnie a very heavy bundle and Ronnie was never a man to drop a bundle and then buy drinks all around. In fact, Ronnie was never a man to buy drinks all around period. So, somehow or other, whichever way they managed it, Grafton was called in, and the next thing anybody knew this jockey who just happened to get along better with horses than most of us do with men, women or children, this jockey had been trampled underfoot by a horse that got out of hand while it was supposed to be alone in the stall with the jockey in question, of whom there was not much left when they came to clean out the stall. Just enough, I guess, for them to identify him, and for Grafton to collect from Ehrlich. He collected somewheres around three thousand for that job—a big jump from his first one,

but, like I say, he was never a man to repeat himself, either his mistakes or his successes.

Then things start getting hot around Montreal. The Kefauver Commission's on in the States and what with one thing or another a lot of hoods are finding it advisable to move on north and a lot of them settle in Montreal. Montreal was always a funny town, crime-wise. There's an awful lot of amateur stuff going on all the time, banks are being knocked over like card-houses, cars are being lifted off the streets like it was over in Russia where they belong to everybody and no one, but the really solid stuff—the books and the dope and the high-priced girlies—all that's handled in very quiet, very conservative fashion, like it's a very respectable enterprise with old established firms and nobody butting in on anybody else. All this, I say, was up to the time when our pushy friends from the States started coming up here and taking over, with a lot of very colorful ideas that were strictly a drug on the market. There is just so much the local population here will take and they strictly don't go in for foreign racketeering techniques.

Which is only by-the-by, in order to set you up for what finally happened to Grafton. While all this was taking place, the Yanks moving in and the local boys getting shoved around a bit and being made to step in line or walk the

plank, Grafton is down in Detroit helping a troublesome politician drive his car up a telephone pole. It seems this politician was bugging a local pillar of the community down there who had been doing nicely for himself and for the politician, until this politician started thinking of himself as a statesman and started asking this businessman for a statesman's cut. Anyway, his car had this trouble with a telephone pole.

Grafton returned to Canada by way of Toronto, some five thousand to the good, minus expenses. He went through Toronto because he'd got word through one of his contacts that there was a dame up there had just insured her elderly husband for a goodly sum of money and wasn't satisfied with the natural rate, at which this old gent was lowering himself into the grave, so she figured Grafton was the man to step on this old buzzard's fingers and make him let go. What he did was, when he learned this old geezer had a bad heart, he followed him around all day for a couple of days, called him up here and there and just held the receiver and breathed into it, caused a brick or two to tumble off a rooftop just ahead of the old man, and then finally, one dark night when the poor old guy had been working late and was going to the parking lot to get his car, Grafton leaps up out of the car with a terrible shriek and—so help me!—the old guy

drops down dead. For this Grafton got a mere two-and-a-half thousand, but then wages are generally lower in Canada.

But you see what I mean about the way he varied his methods. His bare hands, a horse, a car, and a shout in the dark. Never the same thing twice. And *never*, after that first time, *anything that could be identified as murder*. Myself, I don't quite understand why he was so fussy about making these things look like they was not murder, since even if they was known to be murder there was nothing could tie Grafton in on them, but then I'm not Grafton, I couldn't ever do what Grafton done—or make the money Grafton made—so I don't suppose there's much chance I'll ever understand what made Grafton operate, especially not now I'll never know.

Anyway, Grafton lay around Toronto for awhile, and what with one thing and another, by the time he got back to town lots of the Yanks had been chased up from the States and had settled in and there was a number of ugly situations building up. Like the one between Blimpy St. Andrews and Misty Gray, over the hot car industry. Blimpy was a local boy, of course, came up through the Boys Farm outside of Shawbridge (which was quite a place before a bunch of reformers turned it into a sort of model institution), Al Garity's gang, a stint in the Army

where he had a hot thing going running a pool on hockey, baseball, football—you name it, anything that guys could be got to buy pool tickets on. After the army Blimpy started in quietly organizing a gang of kids that were very good with cars. In no time he had a nice sweet modest system going, nothing that would take in millions, but he looked after his boys and turned a nice profit.

The way Blimpy ran things, though, wasn't enough for some of these big-time Americans, and when Mr. Gray came to town everybody said there was going to be trouble, and there was.

Misty—nobody knew whether his name came from 'mysterious' or from the dreamy expression on his face—had been running a car operation down Stateside and right away when he got to Montreal he decided there wasn't room enough in town for an operation like he proposed to set up and the one Blimpy ran. He started taking over Blimpy's boys, and he had his eye on that efficient little garage set-up Blimpy had out in the Laurentians.

Now, Blimpy wasn't a tough, and even if he had been, he wouldn't have been a stupid tough. He knew about Misty's reputation, which was a whole lot worse than that of some hired killers. A lot of talk had gone around the town about him before Misty arrived. He was supposed to have at least two-three killings on his

hands, and to be a guy that operated strictly on his lonesome. Some of the talk about him went that he had a twin-brother somewhere and that they used to operate as a team until they had a real bad falling out, and that Misty had never trusted anyone or let anyone get close to him since. He was a small, slender guy, and what he lacked in weight and muscle he made up for plenty in meanness.

I don't suppose that Blimpy would have even thought of retaliating against a guy like that except for the fact that Blimpy was getting a little old to start in on a new racket or a new town. Even so, he might have taken it lying down, because it was a long time since he'd let himself in for any rough stuff, if he hadn't been encouraged by the fact there were lots of other people had squawks against Misty.

Like Eddie Glick, who came from the same whereabouts as Misty and had an oldtime grudge against him, as well as a lot of healthy fear where Misty was concerned. Eddie was making book in Montreal and had brought his girl up from the States, but then he ditched her for a local girl who was stripping in one of the clubs along the Main. Misty should have left well enough alone, he knew that Eddie already had a valid peeve against him, but there was something about that guy made him want only what other guys had. I don't know how he heard

that Eddie was interested in this stripper, he didn't pay much attention to gossip, but it seems he found out one way or another. Because he showed up at this club soon after Eddie had given his American girl the axe and taken up with this stripper, and he moved right in on her. She didn't take to him much, she knew she had a by-and-large steady guy in Eddie, but there was something about Misty made her scared too, and when Eddie didn't put up much fight for her, well, she didn't have much choice left, did she?

Eddie talked real nasty for a while about Misty, but you could see that it was just talk, and that he was scared to do anything. The guys started giving it right back to Eddie, razzing him about how come he didn't do anything if he was so annoyed with Misty, and one day Eddie broke it about how there was a superstition back home that this Misty just couldn't be killed or harmed any way. They said he slept with his guns on him, that he slept alone in locked rooms, that he always travelled in such a way that there was lots of space around him so that no one could crowd his arm or take a short cut to his ribs. Then one of the guys said he didn't know about this unkillable business, he hadn't heard of the man yet that wouldn't be killed pretty bad from an accident like a broken neck caused by a rope, or any one of a hundred

other ways: and if a guy was unkillable, that only meant you had to call in Grafton—who never killed anybody anyway, only arranged for them to have accidents.

Eddie scoffed at that, of course. It wasn't because he didn't believe in Grafton's reputation, but maybe only because he wasn't ready to take such a step as hiring a killer. Then he heard about this beef that Blimpy had, and it seemed to him that maybe between the two of them . . . Anyway, it would be more economical, since they could split the fee. So he got together with Blimpy, and lo and behold! they found that they saw eye to eye on quite a number of things.

So they placed an ad in the local papers, in the classified section under articles for sale, like whoever wanted to hire Grafton was supposed to do:

For sale: Clarinet only two valves missing, Call—and they listed Blimpy's number, and waited for a call.

It came a few days later. Grafton had come back to Montreal, after doing another job in Toronto that involved someone walking through a construction job underneath where some of the workmen had been careless enough to leave loose bricks; and a job in Hamilton where a guy who was ordinarily not much of a boating fan and certainly no swimmer went rowing in a lake and the boat got tempera-

mental. Everyone was beginning to wonder, how long would Grafton be able to go on without committing murder and without repeating himself?

Anyway, he came back and answered the ad and arranged for a meeting with Blimpy. As usual, the meeting took place where Blimpy couldn't get a look at Grafton but could tell him what was wanted and could hand over half the money for the job in advance. When Grafton heard who the accident victim was to be, Blimpy says Grafton seemed to take on funny. He asked a lot of questions about Gray, not just the sort of questions he would need to know in his line of work, like what were Gray's habits and who were his friends and where did he go, and so forth, but a lot of other things too, like where had Gray come from, and how old was he, and what was his character—and such like. Then he sort of paused, and Blimpy said it was like he wasn't sure he would take on the job, which would have been a strange thing, because Grafton is never known to have turned a job down before.

"You'll do it, won't you?" Blimpy says.

"Whaddayou got against this guy, anyway?" Grafton says.

"What the hell difference does that make? We want him out and we're willing to pay, within reason."

"How much?"

"Well, I hear you took three thousand from Ehrlich, but we don't have—"

"Never mind what I got from Ehrlich. Don't believe everything you hear. Anyway this guy Gray is supposed to be very hard to kill," Grafton says.

"That's right, he don't let anyone near him, not even people he knows. Do you figure you can do it?"

Then Grafton is quiet so long Blimpy begins to get a nervous feeling. "Hey, Grafton, you there? I asked you—"

"I can do it all right," Grafton says very softly so that Blimpy still figures something is wrong but can't make out what. "Only it'll cost."

"How much?"

"Ten thousand."

"Hey! Where do you get off asking. . . . Listen, this isn't Chicago or New York, you know."

"You're doing all right, Blimpy. At least you were until Gray came along. And let me tell you something about this Gray. You think you're having hard times now, it'll get an awful lot harder before Gray's through around here."

"Yeah," Blimpy says, very glum. He's got a head on his shoulders, and he can figure Gray's type. He knows that hard as it is for him to put up his share of the ten thousand now it'll be a whole lot harder for him in no time flat to afford

half an economy size toothpaste unless a stop is put to Gray. "O.K.," he says, "I'll raise the dough. Where do I meet you to give it to you?" He figures maybe he can con Eddie Glick into believing the price was like fifteen thousand, then Eddie will put up seven and a half and all he'll have to kick in will be two and a half.

"I'll let you know," Grafton says.

And then a couple of days later it's all arranged, and Blimpy passes over the first instalment and tries to pump Grafton on when it's going to be. "Soon," is all Grafton says. And the bets start going around about whether he's going to be able to do it, and what method he'll use.

Surprisingly enough, considering his reputation, the odds are running about eight-to-five against Grafton, only maybe it's not so surprising considering Gray's reputation and the fact that he's taken more and more lately to holing up in his penthouse apartment where he don't let nobody in, not even a milkman, without seeing his credentials and telling him through the peep-hole to come into the house backwards and with his arms out to the side.

But the odds against Grafton take a real big drop a couple of days later, that was a Wednesday, when someone comes running to tell Blimpy he actually caught a glimpse of Gray *outside* the apartment; or rather, to avoid what

counsel calls leading the witness, this guy says he saw Gray going into the apartment, so it seems logical to conclude if he's going in then he's been out.

That very afternoon, the news is out: Gray is dead.

The news came from, as counsel would say, an unimpeachable source: the cops. Now I'm no more an admirer of the cops than the next guy, but one thing you got to hand it to them, they know when a guy is dead—they got all sorts of ways to prove it.

Gray is dead—only how did Grafton do it? Not merely what method did he use—since, when a guy like Misty Gray dies suddenly, it's going to have to look awful good for the cops to take it for anything but murder—but how did he actually get in and get under Gray's guard?

The answer to the second question we never get. The answer to the first question comes out soon—since the cops, who don't like giving out information unless it reflects good on them, have to go through the formalities of calling in acquaintances to identify the corpse and answer questions—and this answer to the first question is really a stunner and sends Grafton's stock shooting up like crazy.

How did Gray die? According to the cops—suicide! Suicide! A bullet through his temple by a weapon he was holding in his own mitt. Misty Gray!

The funny thing is, though, Grafton is never heard from again, he never even shows up for the balance of his money, though Blimpy of course tells Eddie Glick that he has, and collects a full five thousand from Eddie, thereby getting his half of Gray's murder—excuse me, suicide—absolutely free. Only Blimpy nearly goes wild with fear what with worrying that maybe Eddie will hear Grafton never collected or maybe Grafton will somehow figure Blimpy's crossed him up. Another thing that nearly drives Blimpy out of mind, considering the state he's already in, a number of people who are called in to identify the stiff tell Blimpy they got a funny feeling looking at it, as if there was something not quite kosher about the way Gray looked. They never let this on to the cops, of course, and they feel more than a little foolish mentioning it.

After all, a guy who's committed suicide by putting his gun right up against his temple's bound to have his looks altered somewhat.



CROSS and . . .

BY B. D. DUPONT

WILLIE BLAINE hurried up to the unmarked car, caught the lieutenant as he got out. "He's dead, Lieutenant. The lab boys are in there now. Jeff . . . Jeff's taking it pretty hard, Lieutenant."

"How'd it happen?" The lieutenant was sweating through his summer suit. It was a sticky day. This summer was breaking records for heat, the papers said.

"Well . . . we're not sure yet. I mean, no one felt like talking to Jeff just yet. They thought they should wait for you . . ."

The lieutenant looked steadily at Blaine. "You boys are all heart," he said. "Saving the nice parts for me like that. Christ." He pushed past Blaine, went on in to the house.

They were buddies. For seventeen years they'd worked together . . . closer than most. They were cops. Then one of them went crooked.

"Where's Jeff?" he said, roughly, to a patrolman just inside the door. He watched, his face blank, as the patrolman tried to get rid of his cigarette.

"In the kitchen, Lieutenant," the patrolman said, red-faced. "Through there."

The lieutenant pushed through the kitchen door, and found Jeff Nolan sitting at a dinette table, staring at his fists in front of him. He was a big man, with no fat on him. There were circles of sweat around his armpits, and a splash of moisture down his backbone. His tie was loose, and the top two buttons of his shirt undone. He didn't look up at the lieutenant.

The lieutenant glanced at the stove, saw coffee warming, and poured a cup. "Coffee?" he said.

Jeff looked around. "What?" he said. "Oh. No. No, it's too hot for coffee." The lieutenant sat in a dinette chair opposite Jeff, first spinning it front side to. "How'd it happen, Jeff?" he said.

"I'm through, Lieutenant," Jeff said. "I resign. To hell with it." He opened his right fist and dropped his badge on the kitchen table.

The lieutenant's eyes narrowed. "What do you think this is, a western movie?" he said, his voice low and hard. "You're too old for a grandstand stunt like that, Jeff—especially with me. Now pick up that damn shield and tell me what happened!"

Jeff's eyes rose slowly to the

lieutenant's. "Lieutenant," he said, "I'm gonna leave it lay right there, and when I tell you what happened, you can decide whether you want to pick it up or not."

Blaine stuck his head through the kitchen door. "You want me to phone his wife, Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant?" Jeff said. "I know her pretty well—do you mind if I . . ."

"Hold off, Blaine," the lieutenant said.

"Thanks, Hank," Jeff said to the lieutenant.

"Let's have it, Jeff," the lieutenant said, and wiped his forehead. "I've got a report to make."

"It's messy, Hank. I don't . . . hell, I might as well start at the beginning. You know Mutt . . ." his face went funny. "You *knew* Mutt as well as I did."

The lieutenant barely nodded. "Mutt" O'Brian had made detective four months after Jeff Nolan, and they'd worked together—tightly together—ever since. Seventeen years, sixteen of them under the lieutenant. The three of them had more seniority than anyone else in the department.

"Okay. Well, I've been poking around by myself lately in this dope thing, talking to people, you know? Trying to find out why all the raids lately have been turning up church socials instead of horse. I figured, you know, there's a leak somewhere. It didn't make sense, so many false alarms.

"So, I guess about a month ago, I was having a beer at the Tumble Inn after I checked out, hoping to maybe hear something, and Little Smith came in—he's that junkie we sent up three years ago for pushing, not the fat guy who does errands for Stanley."

"I can keep the Smiths straight," the lieutenant said.

"Yeah. Well, he was mad, so I bought him a drink. We got along, sort of, because of that short stretch he did. He thought I'd helped to get him off easy, and I didn't say anything to change his mind, because I figured he might be helpful sometime.

"He was pushed out of shape at the big boys, he said. He was going to pull out, head for the big city. So I sounded him about the leak, you know, because he thought maybe he owed me a favor." Jeff ran down. His shirt was wetter, a lot wetter, than when he had started to talk.

The lieutenant suddenly knew why. His face didn't show it. "So . . ." he said.

"So Little Smith fingered Mutt, Lieutenant."

There was a silence. The lieutenant felt a little sick. He'd run a clean department for sixteen years, and while his boys were rough, and kept a tight control of the town, he trusted them, figured them for good cops. And Mutt—hell, Mutt was his best detective, a jolly fat man with an open Santa

Claus face, the kind of guy you couldn't help but trust. But he'd turned crooked anyway, Santa Claus or no Santa Claus, and now he lay dead in his own bathroom. The lieutenant swore, one word, softly.

"I didn't believe it at first," Jeff said, his eyes on the table in front of him, "but it began to figure. I saw a lot of him and Maggie, Hank—I ate half my meals here, for Christ sake. Practically one of the family. And . . . well, this dinette set. New. And the color T.V. And the car. Hell, Hank, he's making what I'm making, and I don't have a wife and a mortgage. So I did something lousy." Jeff paused for a moment, ran his hand underneath the back of his collar.

"One evening when I'd stayed for dinner, and Mutt was down at the store for a minute, I checked his bank book. He keeps it in that little desk in there, over by the couch. Hank, he has over eight thousand dollars in the bank!"

"Proof?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yeah. Last week. I saw him cop. I'd been tailing him after duty."

"Goddamn," the lieutenant said. "You knew for a week?"

"There's my shield, Hank."

"How'd he get it, Jeff?" A week! Two days ago they'd raided. A sure thing, everyone said. It drew a blank, and more kids were getting more heroin.

"Last night I put it to him, told

him what I knew. I said I'd have to blow the whistle unless he could get out. It was Maggie that worried me, and him too, I guess. He told me to come over this morning, he'd tell me what he'd do. I got here about nine. I felt lousy, hadn't been able to sleep . . .

"He was a mess, Hank. He must have been up all night. He told me he couldn't get out, that the Man wouldn't let him go, and he asked me to take care of Maggie, do what I could for her. I thought he'd decided to turn himself in and take a fall, from the way he talked. I knew better, I guess, but that's what I thought."

The lieutenant knew better too. Mutt would stay alive for a month at most in the state prison. He'd been a good cop. And the Man was rough. He could handle a prison kill if he wanted.

"He smiled at me and said he had to go to the can. He went upstairs, and I heard the shot. I went up there as fast as I could, but he'd done a good job—right through the heart."

They sat silent.

"Goddamn heat," the lieutenant said.

"Hank, you have my badge. I'm through. Besides I didn't tell you about Mutt for a week, I've had a bellyful. I couldn't work with anybody else—I wouldn't be any good, you know that."

"Yeah," the lieutenant said after a moment. "Hell. Yeah."

"But I got a favor to ask. Mutt said look after Maggie, and hell, I would anyway. Now if this goes down as suicide, it'll kill her, Hank, it'll just kill her. She's a good Catholic, and it'll just tear her to pieces, I know. She's a great person, but she's not strong, Hank . . . and it won't do any harm. You put it down, 'He was cleaning his pistol and it went off,' and everybody will know what happened anyway, you know that."

The lieutenant thought about it. Jeff was right. Most suicides on most forces were covered that way. And he knew Maggie too, had eaten her Irish stew himself more than once. But once he signed a report like that, he'd have to back it up, no matter what.

"The papers?" he said.

"Hell, Hank, all the reporters liked Mutt. They'd be glad to go along, you know that."

The lieutenant toyed with something on the table. He noticed that it was Jeff Nolan's badge. When was this goddamn heat going to break?

"Okay, Jeff," he said wearily. "It was an accident."

For the first time that day some of the strain left Jeff's face, and it resumed its normal handsomeness. "Thanks, Hank," he said.

"You better phone Maggie," the lieutenant said, his voice gruff.

"Yeah." Jeff was silent for a moment. "Yeah, I better do that now." He walked to the phone on the

wall, dialed the office where Maggie worked.

"Hello, Maggie O'Brian, please? Hello Maggie? Listen Maggie, this is Jeff. There's been an accident here . . ." He heard the kitchen door swing, and saw that the lieu-

tenant had left the kitchen. "Maggie?" he continued, "It went like clockwork. I got him with one shot, through the heart. And it'll be listed as accidental. The insurance will be double now—accidental death . . . I love you too, Maggie."





“Don’t tempt me!”

BY ROBERT PAGE JONES

He was an ex-con, a convicted rapist. What did he stand to lose?

IT STARTED harmlessly enough about a week ago when I delivered a carton of booze to the old Millstead place on Willow Street.

It was hot and I was pouring sweat by the time I hefted the order out of the Chevy and walked up the gravel path and onto the porch.

The bottles clinked and clanked.

Two fifths of Courvoisier, a quart of Red Label, a big gallon bottle of Beefeaters, assorted mixes, and a couple of twenty-five cent sacks of cubes. The whole thing came to forty-nine dollars and sixty cents. Somebody was going to throw a hell of a drunk . . .

I had no idea who. They had told me at the store that the Millstead place had been empty since the old woman died in January. Probably somebody had rented it for the summer. I didn't really give a damn.

The place was a mess. Paint peeled like dandruff. Weeds grew up between the loose boards in the porch and one of the garage doors hung by a single rusty hinge.

I tried to ring the doorbell with the tip of my elbow and couldn't. I stuck out my shoe and banged it a couple of times against the battered door. I waited. It was so hot that sweat poured down my ribs like water.

I kicked hell out of the door.

A curtain flicked. For the brief part of an instant there was an anonymous blur of face. Then a voice:

"Come around to the kitchen."

It was a typical old-fashion Southern home. The porch ran all of the way around to the back of the house. My feet clomped as I followed it. Past the porch swing hanging from rusty chains. Past geraniums growing out of cracked red pots along the wooden railing.

I didn't have to knock this time.

There was a little metallic snick, and then she was standing there, holding the door open.

That was when it really started.

From the precise instant of that polite little snick when she opened the door.

She was wearing white shorts and a thin summer blouse that crushed softly against her body. I stood there, staring. Her breasts weren't the kind that made Mansfield look like a boy. But they were adequate. Christ, were they adequate. Long, curving legs, that made a man ache to run his hands over them. Thick black hair. And eyes that were green and gold and brown all at the same time.

I'd seen her before.

She'd come into the store a few times for cigarettes or a couple of sixpacks of beer.

"Well," she said and her Southern accent was without the usual honey-sweet thickness. "You finally got here."

"Sorry. We've been pretty busy at the store."

She stepped back and let me into the kitchen. It was one of those huge, old-fashion kitchens that had been built back in the days when you got water by pumping it into the sink from a well. It had been remodeled about thirty years ago. Fancy-patterned linoleum floor, ancient refrigerator with stacked coils on top of it, bread box like an ancient rolltop desk.

"Put the stuff over there," she said.

I dropped the box on the sideboard near the sink and grabbed for my handkerchief. Sweat poured off me. I blotted some of it up with the handkerchief.

"Forty-nine sixty," I said.

"Gracious. You look kind of hot." She smiled through that new white lipstick that doesn't look like lipstick at all but like maybe somebody had been chewing on her lips. "Why don't you fix us both a small drink while I find some money."

I watched her.

When she moved away the motion of her behind in the white shorts kept time with the slamming in my chest.

I waited.

There was a sweet ripe smell of fresh fruit in the kitchen. Peaches. I looked and saw a half dozen of them lined up along the window sill over the sink.

She came back with a tight wad of bills. She put them down near the cardboard carton and they lay there, moving, crinkling faintly in the sticky silence. I couldn't take my eyes off them.

It was like the peaches. I could almost smell the money lying there. There was a hell of a lot more than the forty-nine sixty for the booze.

I unwrapped five tens and went into my pocket for the change. I felt like a goddamned fool digging around for four measely dimes. There must have been five hundred dollars just crumpled up there like wilted lettuce. And she had her back turned. She wasn't even watching me.

"Where're those drinks?"

"What?"

"You were going to fix us a drink, remember?"

"Say, listen . . ." I tried to keep it light but I couldn't even look at her. "If I had a drink every time I delivered a bottle of booze I wouldn't make it through the day."

"You mean you don't make a habit of it?"

"No, mam . . ."

"In that case, one can't do you much harm, can it? What's your name?"

"Shchapov. Johnny Shchapov."

"Polish?"

"Uh-huh."

"My old man was Polish."

"'sthat right?"

She got out a couple of glasses, rinsed them. Then the ice. She grabbed the Red Label, ripped off the foil—*clink—splash*—corked it—*swish*—turned off the tap, and stood holding out the glass.

"Here, relax."

Sunlight slashed in through the kitchen window. It cast the shadow of the peaches on the linoleum floor. I took the glass and drank part of it down.

"My name's Lara," she said. "I hope you don't mind. But it's hot, and I can't stand to drink alone. I always say there's something wrong when a person starts drinking alone."

I didn't say anything. The sunlight came in. I could hear a fly buzzing against the screen trying to get at the peaches.

We just stood there, looking at each other. I lit a cigarette. The fly buzzed. Her face was calm, a sul-

len mask behind the blue smoke of her cigarette, but I could see it in her eyes. I'd seen it in other women. It was in her eyes and in the faint sheen of sweat on her forehead and in the way her lush breasts moved under the soft material of her blouse.

But I wasn't having any.

Not after two years in the jug for rape.

"I think about you," she said huskily. "I'll bet you didn't know that. You're kind of ugly, like somebody smacked you in the face or something, but I think about you anyway. Ever since the first time you waited on me at the store. Do you remember?"

"No."

She came at me along the sink, smiling. I didn't know what to do. Those eyes, the white shorts, started my heart tripping in my chest.

Abruptly, she stopped, listening. A car door banged. Her breathing changed. Suddenly she went crazy. She grabbed the glass from my hand and tossed it into one of those trash cans that pop open when you step on a pedal. Her own glass was still nearly full but she threw that in. Then the Red Label. Christ! A quart of good Scotch! The opened bag of cubes. Everything. It was nuts.

"Hey . . ."

"Get out of here!"

She whispered it but it was almost a scream.

Well, I'm telling you, she didn't

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

have to say it twice. I turned and headed for the door but before I could open it she had come up behind me and swung me around. Her arms came up around my neck and for a wild, crazy, pulsating couple of moments her lips were all over mine like fire. Then she yanked open the door and damn near shoved me out onto the porch.

"I'll be seeing you, Johnny Shchapov," she whispered and the sound of it was like a zipper up my back. "*I'll be seeing you.*"

Like hell, I thought. Like hell you'll be seeing me.

I lit a cigarette going down the steps. There was a car in the garage trail, a four-year-old Caddy, white with red clay spattered the full length of it as if it had been pushed hard across the whole state of Georgia. A guy was coming at me across the crisp lawn. I'm six foot two but he looked about twice my size. A big red-headed guy, quick and meaty, with small scars shiny against the whiteness of his face.

He fixed stern blue eyes on the words *Ace Liquor House* painted on the door of the Chevy and walked past me without so much as a nod.

I hit the sidewalk.

"Hey!" He was standing up on the porch, watching me. "You from the liquor store?"

"Yeah."

"You bring any beer?"

"No. The lady didn't order any."

He shrugged, shaking his head. The screen door banged. Lara had come out onto the porch to meet him.

As I drove back across town I could feel a rodent gnawing at something way down in my gut.

I shivered and shook.

The rodent had opened an old wound in me. It was like an incision you think has healed until you give it a good bang and suddenly it starts flowing again. Well, it was like that. I hadn't been that close to a girl in a long time, and somehow it brought it all back to me.

I tried not to think about it. I turned into the traffic that crawled along Mainstreet and ate smoke from my cigarette and tried not to think at all. But it was no use. It was already running loose inside my head, like a motion picture projected against the lining of my skull, the film cut into little pieces and spliced back together by a madman.

I stopped for a light and sat there, shaking. There was no getting away from the pictures. I stopped fighting it and let them come.

I closed my eyes and saw Thelma. We were together in her old man's cafe in Huntsville. Just the two of us. She handled the tables and the counter and I slung hash in the back and passed the stuff to her through a little connecting window cut into the wall.

Thelma.

She was a bitch.

Not more than seventeen, and pretty, with lots of black hair and dark brown eyes and a slight lisp when she talked. There was Indian blood in her but that didn't bother her any. She still thought she was something special. She thought she was pretty hot because her old man owned the place and I only slung hash in the kitchen. She figured that because of her old man I had to take orders from her, too. She figured I was nothing, a drifter, worse even than the tramps that came into the cafe.

At night, after closing, we used to have to pitch in and clean up the place. That's when she used to really go to work on me. It was a game she played. She enjoyed it. For two months she worked. She used to play the juke box while she wiped the tables, her blouse open down the front, the sound of her voice in soft harmony with the music. White teeth gleaming. Skirt so tight I could see the line of her panties across her thigh.

You should know about me.

There was a little room off the kitchen where I slept. I used to lay back there on my bed and read. I read everything I could get my hands on. History books, books about people and places, just about everything. And I tried to remember what I read. I studied hard. I wanted to be somebody, to have something more out of life than I'd had as a kid, something better.

But Thelma had her way.

She kept after me, encouraging me, taunting me with her body until one night it all boiled up inside of me and I could no longer control what happened.

But it wasn't rape.

Hell, she wanted it to happen. She made it happen. One minute she was smiling at me as usual, teasing me, and the next minute we were up on the counter where she had put the ketchup bottles.

It was like we had both gone crazy for a while. The juke box blared and the ketchup bottles went all over hell. She liked it so much she wouldn't stop even after her old man came in.

He tried to pull me off the counter and I tried to get off but she only clung harder to me, whimpering and shuddering, until she had me as bad as herself and her old man had to hit me with one of the ketchup bottles.

He had me sent up for rape.

Rape.

I did the full two years and after that, when I got out, everything began to go bad. It was like a brand burned right into my forehead. *Rapist.* I drifted. I got a dozen jobs. Sometimes it would be okay for a couple of weeks or a month and then somebody would notice that two year gap in my record and begin to ask questions. That's all it ever took. They wouldn't even give me a chance after that. Not like a guy who'd been up for robbery or even murder. My crime carried a

stigma that placed me at the lowest level of criminal society.

Degenerate. . .

I pulled onto the gravel parking lot beside the liquor store and went inside.

My mind still ached with it.

"What the hell kept you, Shchapov?" Bernie Hitt, the owner, a fat little guy with a perpetual cigar and gray hair that stuck out in wispy strands. "Never mind. I don't want to hear. It's Saturday. You'd better go back and stock the cooler with beer."

"Now?"

"Now!"

"Sure, Bernie. Don't get excited."

The cooler was one of the new reach-through models with doors all along the front and back. The back doors opened directly into the store room. I propped one of them open with a case of cognac and started loading in the beer. After about twenty minutes I was caught up. I popped open a can of beer and sat down with a cigarette.

I was still nervous and keyed up.

Hitt came into the store room and stood scowling at me.

"Get with it, Shchapov."

"The cooler's loaded solid," I said.

"Sweep up, then."

I sat there.

Hitt went back out front. He wasn't a bad guy but I hated the job. The hours were lousy and the pay was lousy. It was almost funny. Johnny Shchapov. The guy every-

body said was going to set the world on fire. Clerk in a stinking liquor store.

Maybe I'd just been hanging around too long. I'd been at the liquor store for three months and there hadn't been any sign of trouble. Maybe now was the time to try for a decent job somewhere and settle down.

I laughed out loud.

I didn't even have bus fare out of town. My only suit had ripped right up the back two weeks before. I was two months behind on my room rent. Hell, with the way things were I'd be lucky to hang onto the job I had . . .

I grabbed a broom and spent the next fifteen or twenty minutes sweeping out. There were about thirty cases of empty soda pop bottles and I stacked them by the door so the distributor could pick them up in the morning. Then I went in and washed up and put on a clean white shirt and a clip-on bow tie.

At about six o'clock on Saturday the rush begins. I went out front to help Hitt behind the counter. There wasn't much action. A couple of guys came in for beer, stood swapping dirty jokes with Hitt for a while, and went out. An old lush-eyed broad came in. I sacked a bottle of wine for her and rang it up. Something like hell came into me as I looked down into the register.

Funny that it hadn't hit me before. All that dough. Crisp as wasp

wings. Enough to get me as far away as I could ever want to go.

I could feel the rat running around inside my belly. The phone rang. I slammed the register drawer with all my might and yanked up the receiver.

"Ace Liquor."

"Johnny?"

The rat went crazy inside of me. Clawing and slashing. Because right away I recognized the voice

"What do you want?"

"You've got to come over, Johnny. I mean it. I've got to see you."

"I can't."

"Now, dammit!"

"I can't leave the store."

"Johnny . . ."

I hung up.

Seven o'clock came. A hot night, thick and sticky. As soon as it got dark the kids started driving in their cars and loading up with beer. By nine-thirty I had to go back and restock the cooler.

I looked at the clock. In a half hour we would be closing up. I wasn't going to feel bad about that. My nerves felt like tiny worms crawling just below the surface of my skin . . .

I was still working back in the store room when Hitt came looking for me.

"Hurry it up, Shchapov. I've got a delivery for you."

"Willow Street?"

He looked surprised.

"How'd you know?" he said.

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

I didn't answer him. I sacked the phone order and took it out to the car. It was a quart of gin, and it didn't make any sense, because I'd delivered a quart of the stuff that afternoon.

It got to me.

I squealed off of the lot, thinking about the way her voice had sounded over the phone, and as I turned into Mainstreet and headed north I got the peculiar feeling that I was driving headlong over the side of a bottomless abyss . . .

When she opened the door her face was like nothing in this world. Her features had changed somehow, going into flat planes and thinning out around the mouth, but with the same wildness in her eyes.

I put the bottle on the table in the kitchen with the others.

"Why didn't you come when I called?" she said.

"That'll be five twenty-nine for the gin," I said.

"Johnny . . ."

"What?"

"You must think I'm crazy."

"Christ, yes, I think you're crazy."

"Because of this afternoon?"

"That's part of it."

"I can explain that. I had to throw you out, Johnny. If Harry had caught us drinking together in the kitchen, he . . ."

"Harry?"

"Yes." A throat muscle twitched just below the surface of her skin. "Good old Harry. He won't barge in on us this time, I promise . . ."

She looked at me, her white lips parted, and with that one look she had me damn near as crazy as she was.

She kissed me. Her hair fell away from her face. We stood that way, swaying, and I thought *to hell with Harry. Let Harry look out for himself.*

The ice cubes had frozen solid in the plastic sack and I had to break them up with a pick. I mixed a couple of drinks and we took them into the living room. The front door was open and a breeze blew in through the screen. We listened to music and wrestled around in there for maybe an hour.

"Come on," she said after a while. "I've got something I want to show you."

"What is it?"

"A surprise."

We went down the long hall.

Well, she showed me, and right there I thought I was going to be sick.

It was Harry.

She had walked in the blood and tracked it around.

He looked as if he had died trying to crawl out of the bathtub. He hung over the side with his cheek on the tile floor. Blood spurted. It poured out of a small hole in his neck like a fountain.

I dropped my glass and heard it

shatter on the floor. I turned and ran down the hall, really running. She came after me.

"Johnny!"

Something in the way she said it pulled my head around.

She was standing in the door to the bedroom. I stopped and stood there, trembling. My stomach flopped. She had gotten a gun somewhere and was pointing it at me.

"Don't go, Johnny."

Her hand shook.

"Now listen," I said. "Just listen, will you, for Christ's sake. I don't know what your friend's doing in there bleeding all over the floor. I don't want to know. But I'm getting out of here. I'm . . ."

"I killed him," she said softly.

Hell. I *knew* that.

"And you know what?" she said.

"What?"

"I did it with the ice pick. The one you used to separate the cubes when you fixed our drinks."

"You bitch," I said.

She smiled at me.

"It's around here someplace. I hid it."

"But why? Why would you do a crazy thing like that? It doesn't make sense. It . . ."

"Of course it does, honey."

"I'm not your honey," I said.

"I'm not anything . . ."

"But you are. I mean, you make me just flip. And you'll flip yourself when I tell you about it."

"When you tell me about what?"

"The money, silly."

I just stood there and stared at her.

"What money?" I said.

"A quarter of a million dollars," she said. Just thinking about it made her wriggle in the tight shorts. "The money we're going to take from the Security Trust Bank at Hemetville . . ."

I waited for her to laugh. I waited for her to fall down and froth. But she just stood there looking serious.

I said the obvious thing.

"We?"

"That's right, honey. Just the two of us. You and me. Isn't it the most exciting thing you ever heard? The two of us together with all that money . . ."

"Uh-uh."

"Uh-huh. Because it's so simple. It's all been worked out. Everything."

"You're not kidding," I said. "You're really talking about robbing a bank."

"Sure. Everybody should rob a bank. It broadens you."

"You're really crazy."

She smiled.

I said nothing.

"You know what?" she said. "I really go for you. Ever since I saw you at the store . . ."

"You told me," I said.

Well, she was nuts all right.

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

But she was still holding onto the gun.

"You don't even know about me," I said.

"Sure I do," she said. "I know more than you'd think. I notice things. You shouldn't be clerking in a liquor store. You shouldn't be living in a crummy town like this. You're too smart and too good looking for that . . ."

"Yeah. Well, what if I said I wasn't interested? What if I just walked out of here and kept on going?"

She laughed softly.

"And leave a quarter of a million dollars?" she said.

"That's right."

We looked at each other.

"I'd hate to have to go to the police," she said.

"Huh?"

"I'd hate to have to show 'em the ice pick you used on poor old Harry."

"The pick I used?"

"Sure. Your fingerprints are on it. Everything is so simple, really . . ."

"You bitch!" I said.

"Think about it, honey."

We were still standing in the hall. Light from the bedroom bathed her whole body. In spite of the gun, in spite of the white-toothed smile that was pure animal, she was something.

And there was no doubt about it. She had me thinking.

We went back into the kitchen.

She got the bottle of booze and put it on the table between us and then she started to talk, her voice flat as slate, but the words pouring out of her like coins gushing out of a slot machine.

"It was Harry's idea," she said. "I met Harry in Florida. He'd been in Havana and had come over here when the trouble started in Cuba. He was kind of no good, you know? A regular con man. He'd run a floating crap game in Havana and when I ran into him in Florida he had a cheap carni show he carried around in the back of truck. I'm telling you the truth. It was awful. He had a wire pen he used to set up by driving stakes into the ground and winding the wire around. He'd put a live alligator and an old Seminole in it and they'd wrestle. Honest. And it was so bad. It was terrible. I don't think either one of 'em had any teeth. It used to make me sick just to watch 'em. But Harry was smart. The way he used to talk to the suckers was something, honest. He'd get 'em so worked up about what was going to happen they'd pay a whole dollar just to watch those two wrestle. Only when they saw how they'd been taken they used to get mad and ask for their money and Harry would sweet talk 'em while he took down the cage and before you knew it he'd have everything in the truck and they'd be on their way to another town. That's how I met him. I was living in Punta

Gorda when Harry came through with his show. Well, I guess I sort of went for him, you know? We went for each other." She took a long, nervous pull on her cigarette. "Punta Gorda was lousy. It was hot. So I went on the road with Harry. I used to sell tickets while he stood up on a little platform that swung down from the back of the truck and talked to the rubes. But I hated it. I hated living with that stinking alligator and the Indian watching me all the time like maybe he wanted to wrestle me, too, or maybe gum me to death. So one night I just took off and caught a bus back to Punta Gorda. Harry came. When I told him I wouldn't go back with the show he said we didn't need the show anymore, that he'd figured out something better, something big . . ."

"The bank job?"

"Yes. He'd brought the show through Hemetville the year before and he'd figured it out then. He carried a little notebook around with him and he spent a whole year working out the details. And listen," she went on, "when I tell you how easy it is, you'll die, you'll just die. You see, Friday is payday for the fruit packers, and for the first couple of hours the bank puts out maybe a quarter of a million dollars in payrolls. A quarter of a million! And it's just sitting there on desks behind the teller's cages, because they have to make the payrolls up in advance, and . . ."

Well, right then was when it started to hit me.

There was this thing inside of me.

I tried to think. My brain was like a loaf of bread that had been soaked in water. Her words came to me as if they were being spoken into a long pipe.

"... and all of it in small bills," she was saying. "Neatly packaged and in sacks. Just waiting for us. Waiting for me and you, Johnny. And all we have to do is ..."

It was insane.

I listened for a full twenty minutes and she'd been right about one thing. Harry was no slob. He was smart. Plenty smart. He'd figured everything out right down to the gnat's eyelash.

The longer she talked the smoother it sounded.

Until suddenly I wanted the money.

With the money I could be somebody. No more slinging hash. No more clerking in a miserable liquor store. No more cringing every time the boss called me to the front of the store, afraid he'd found out, afraid he was going to look at me and say what all the others had said:

"You'd better clear out, Shchapov. I can't afford to have a rapist working here. I can't have my women customers waited on by a convicted sex fiend ..."

Well, to hell with that.

But, I mean, *robbing a bank*.

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

Any way you looked at it it was crazy. *She* was crazy, sitting there talking about it as if she were planning a rummage sale, while the brains of the operation spilled out onto the bathroom floor.

"What about Harry?" I said.

"Hmmm?"

"You remember Harry," I said.

"You killed him with an ice pick ..."

She started to laugh and the sound of it made me feel weak and dizzy. She told me about Harry. When she talked her eyes went black and her lips pulled back across her teeth and as I listened to her I couldn't rid my mind of what was in the bathroom.

"... so we had a big fight," she was saying. "He was going to throw me out. But I couldn't let him. Because, you know, all of that money. So I did the only thing I could ..."

There it was again. Like it was alive. Gnawing away inside of me. It got to me, plenty.

And then she was sitting on my lap and her mouth was on mine and mine was on hers and for a minute I didn't even think about the money. But only for a minute, because the thing was still running around like crazy in my stomach.

I held her away from me.

"What about ... *him*?" I said.

"Harry?"

"Hell yes, Harry!"

"What about him?"

"It's the middle of August," I

said. "We can't just leave him lying around the house . . ."

I drank a couple of straight shots before I had nerve enough to go back into the bathroom.

I wound adhesive tape around Harry's neck to stop the bleeding. I looped it around and around in strips, layer on layer, until he resembled a naked clergyman who wore his collar even when he took a bath.

Only he was dead, and it wasn't so funny.

I yanked down the shower curtain and rolled the body up in it. The curtain was made of thin plastic and I could see his eyes bulging up at me through the pattern of delicate rose buds printed on it. He gave me the creeps. I wound a towel around his head so I wouldn't have to look at his face. There was a shower cap hanging on a hook and I yanked that on him to hold the towel in place. With the remaining adhesive tape I glued all the loose ends together. Then I carried him out to the car.

There was no sign of anybody.

I put him in the back seat of the Chevy, on the floor, and spread some junk on top of him.

I went back inside.

Lara was fixing herself another drink, as calm as she could be, her eyes changing color every time the light caught them.

"I want the ice pick," I said.

"Uh-uh. The ice pick is my insurance you won't walk out on me."

"Listen, you little bitch!" I grabbed her and slammed her hard up against the kitchen table. "I'll get rid of your boy friend for you, because I'm just crazy enough to want to make a try for that dough, but once we're rid of him we start out on this thing even. Understand?"

She stood perfectly still, watching me, her breath coming out in a low hiss.

She tried to kiss me.

"The ice pick . . ." I said.

She had stuck it into the woodwork up underneath the sink.

I took it with me out to the car. I drove. I thought of Lara back there in the old house. I thought of Harry in the back seat on the floor. Then I thought of the money. I tried to imagine it all stacked up in neatly packaged bundles and I couldn't.

It seemed impossible.

Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars . . .

It had started to rain. A light mist sifted down and I switched on the wipers. I turned on the radio and got only static. Hemetville had only one station and it went off the air at midnight. I punched the selector button and got music.

I drove to Fort Gaines, about thirty miles. From there it was only a few more miles to the Chattahoochee River. By the time I got there my hands were sweating on the wheel. I pulled the Chevy off the

road under some shadowy trees and stopped. The rain had stopped but the ground was still wet and soggy.

I got out and was walking around to the other side as a car pulled up behind mine. It was an ancient pick-up truck, a skinny dog standing in the back. The door opened quickly. A man got out.

He was a big, up-and-down colored guy, his face grinning and cautious at the same time.

He walked up to me.

"You got trouble, mister?"

"No . . ." I couldn't think.

"Thought maybe if you was out of gas or something I'd give you a lift. Ain't many cars along here this time of night."

"Thanks just the same." We were standing on the shoulder of the road by the car and out of the corners of my eyes I could see Harry all wound up in plastic inside on the floor. "I've been pushing it pretty hard since Atlanta. Thought I'd stop along here for a minute or two and stretch my legs . . ."

I was damn near shaking.

"Yeah, well, just thought I'd check," he said.

I stood there swallowing down the fear in me until his tail light disappeared around a turn in the road. Then I yanked open the door and dragged Harry out onto the ground. If anybody came by then and caught me in their headlights I was dead.

There was no wind. Not a sound. And the rainclouds had cleared

enough to let through bright spears of moonlight.

I dragged Harry's body down through the woods. Clumps of mud stuck to my shoes. Car headlights came out of nowhere on the road and for a minute I stood frozen with my Adam's apple like a wad of dry bread in my throat but the car went on past.

A log was caught on some roots at the edge of the river. I draped Harry's body over it. The water made sucking noises as it swirled past the bank. I picked up a dozen or so heavy stones and tucked them inside the shower curtain.

I stood there with my heart socking in my chest.

Then I jumped into the water.

It was so cold I damn near passed out with the shock of it. I grabbed the end of the log and steered it out toward the center of the river. The water felt slick and greasy. It swirled up around my armpits, then over my shoulders, until just my head stuck up above the surface.

When I was sure it was deep enough I dropped anchor.

The log bobbed like a cork with the weight suddenly gone from it.

No more Harry. Nothing. Not even a bubble.

I shivered and shook all the way back to Hemetville and it wasn't just from the wet clothes. I drove and tried to feel something for the guy back there in the river. But the shakes weren't for him, either.

I was shivering because I was

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

scared; scared of being caught and electrocuted for a murder I didn't commit.

I wasn't supposed to take the Chevy home overnight. After a late delivery I always drove back to the store, left the car on the lot, and hopped a bus. But not tonight. The busses stopped running at midnight and I wasn't about to walk.

I had a room in a frazzle-faced jumble of cabins called the *Rose View Motor Hotel*. Thirty bucks a month and no maid service. Not even a kitchen. Just an electric hot plate on one end of the blistered dresser and a foam-plastic cooler for food I'd managed to swipe from the store.

The bathroom was like a remodeled phone booth. I got out of the wet clothes, showered, and put on some fresh underwear. Then I went in and fixed myself a drink. Straight Courvoisier. That's one of the things about working in a liquor store. Once you learn how to juggle the inventory you don't have to drink cheap booze.

I stretched out on the bed and tried not to think.

Maybe tomorrow I'd take what I had coming at the store and move on. Maybe go up to Atlanta. Maybe even bum my way out to California.

I smeared a hand across my face.

All that money . . .

Somebody banged the door.

Lara?

Hell, she didn't even know where I lived.

I lay there.

The banging came again, heavy fists knocking. I got up and opened it. A couple of county troopers, looking like giants in their big campaign hats, stood on the porch under the naked bulb. Bugs swarmed around the light in a black cloud.

"John Shchapov?"

"Yes."

They looked at me through the screen door. Their expressions were bored. But they weren't smiling.

One of them, his red face soft with wrinkles, reached out and tested the door.

It was still locked.

"My name's Jensen," he said. "This is Trooper Willeford. Mind opening the door? We'd like to ask a few questions."

"What about?"

They stared at me through the screen.

"Open up, Shchapov." He spoke in a powerful, low voice, the words solid with accusation. "We want to talk to you."

I was so scared I was afraid to take a deep breath, afraid to breathe even, so I just stood there.

I began to sweat badly.

God . . . what was it? Harry? That was impossible. He was at the bottom of the river. Lara? She wouldn't be that crazy. She wouldn't try to pin me with a

phony rap. Not and risk getting involved herself. Hitt? Maybe he'd gone by the store late and noticed the car missing and sent these guys to. . .

Sweat poured.

The colored guy! Oh, God . . . that had to be it! He'd been suspicious. He'd come back and seen me dump the body in the river . . .

"Mind telling me what this is all about?" I said again.

"We think you know what it's about, Shchapov."

"No, I don't. I . . ."

"Open up!"

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't keep the excitement down. I wanted to wipe the sweat from my face and didn't dare.

"You got a warrant?"

"We got one."

The second trooper was younger. He had a smooth, tanned face, and arms like battering rams. Without hesitating he jabbed a fist right through the screen and unlatched the door.

I backed up into the room and they came in after me.

"Get dressed," the young one said.

"What?"

"You heard him. Put your clothes on. We want you to come with us."

"Why? I haven't done anything. I . . ."

They didn't wait. Before I could finish what I was saying the red-faced guy hit me on the side of the

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

head and I went down on the floor.

He stood over me, grunting.

"No more crap, Shchapov."

I got up and started for the bathroom and stopped suddenly. My shoes were in there, drying. If they saw my wet clothes, saw the river mud on my shoes, they'd crucify me.

I was wearing shorts and a white T-shirt. From the dresser I dug out clean khaki trousers, socks, and a sportshirt faded almost white by countless washings. There were some worn tennis shoes under the bed. I got down on my stomach and dragged them out. As I dressed, the troopers watching me, I damn near got sick worrying about what was going to happen to me.

I took my time lacing the shoes, trying to think. As soon as I was finished, the young guy grabbed my arm and wrenched me up off the bed. I moved ahead of him and out onto the gravel parking lot. The patrol car was parked out there with its big red dome light still revolving.

"Iaside, Shchapov."

I did as they told me.

The ride to the station took maybe ten minutes. Nobody spoke on the way. A few calls squawked in over the radio. And then we were there.

My mind worked like crazy.

The station building was a rambling one-story cubicle made of unfinished concrete block. We went down a hall. The young guy

grabbed my arm again and yanked me to a stop in front of an unlabeled door. He knocked.

"Come."

We went inside.

The office looked like a room where unused furniture was stored. Metal filing cabinets with stacks of dusty records piled on top of them. An empty water cooler, the glass jar filled with cobwebs. Folding chairs stacked along one wall. Empty cups were scattered about everywhere, on top of the cabinets and on the floor, and on one of the chairs a pot of coffee perked atop an electric hotplate.

The man seated behind the desk looked as if he stood up only when absolutely necessary. He was immense, with slabs of moving fat on him. Sweat sopped through his khaki uniform in dark smears. His small eyes were little round holes of heat in his face.

"Sit down, Shchapov."

"Look, I'd rather . . ."

"Sit down!"

One of the deputies brought over a folding metal chair and I sat in it.

The fat guy looked at me for a minute. Then he got up and the three of them went out into the corridor. They left me sitting there like a miserable dog. I could hear their muffled voices through the door. I heard my name. My heart was beating so hard I could feel it pulsing against my ribs.

My mind ached.

Well, if they thought they could

make me crack by just leaving me, they were crazy.

After a while the fat guy came back in. He was alone. When he sat down in the chair it cracked like wharf pilings being pounded by an ocean liner. He looked closely at me. He took out a diaper-sized handkerchief and rubbed it over his face.

"I'm Sheriff Turner," he said.

"Yeah, I know."

"You know?"

"Sure. I've seen you come into the liquor store where I work." I looked at his face and it didn't seem too mean. "Listen, Sheriff, maybe you can tell me what this is all about . . ."

"I think you know what it's about, Shchapov."

"No, I don't."

"That kind of attitude won't get you anywhere."

"What attitude, for Christ's sake?"

He looked at me.

He sat there like a rock. After a while he got up without speaking and went out. I waited.

The bastards . . .

It was a half hour before he came back in. He poured a cup of coffee and sat back down at the desk. He lit a cigarette and sat there smoking.

"Listen, you can't . . ." I began.

"Where do you work, Shchapov?"

"I told you."

"What do you do there?"

"Lots of things. I help out . . ."

"Where were you between the time you left the store tonight and a few minutes ago when my boys picked you up at the motel?"

Oh, God, no . . .

They knew.

They knew about Harry.

I had a momentary impulse to scream *I didn't do it! It was that crazy broad. She did it. She killed him and threatened to say it was me if I didn't get rid of the body for her. She's nutty, I tell you. She . . .*

Turner was leaning forward in his chair.

I swallowed hard.

"I had a late delivery," I said.

A quart of gin. You can check . . ."

"Where'd you deliver the gin?"

"What?"

"Where'd you go, Shchapov?"

"Willow Street."

"What time?"

"I don't know. Right after the store closed. Ten o'clock."

"You got a receipt for the delivery?"

Christ! I didn't. She hadn't even paid me.

"Yeah," I said. "I think it's in the car."

"What did you do after that?"

"Nothing. It was a hot night."

"Did you go straight to the hotel?"

"No. I guess I drove around for a while."

"You guess?"

"I drove around."

"You can do better than that."

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

"It's the truth!"

"Did anybody see you?"

"I don't know. Hell, how should I know . . ."

Turner blew breath into his cup and then swallowed from it. He leaned back in his chair. Minutes passed. He didn't say anything until he had finished the coffee. Then he leaned forward and looked right into my eyes and just sat there staring at me until the sweat popped out on my face and I wanted to get up and run out of there screaming.

"Raped anybody lately, Shchapov?"

There it was.

He'd almost whispered it but suddenly there it was right out on the table between us like something sticky you could touch.

And it made me want to laugh.

Because it wasn't Harry after all.

It was the *other* thing.

I should have known. I should have seen it right away. Because I'd been through it before. I'd been yanked out of bed and hauled downtown to stand in a lineup with other known sex offenders, hoping that the woman wouldn't make a mistake, that she wouldn't get hysterical and point a finger in my face and scream *that's the one! He did it! That one right there . . .*

He was watching me.

"No," I said seriously. I tried to keep my voice calm. "I haven't raped anybody."

"Sure you did, Shchapov. We know. Why don't you just . . ."

"That's crazy!"

"They all say that, Shchapov."

"I don't care what they say. I haven't raped anybody." I was beginning to get scared all over again. "I didn't rape that girl three years ago. Her old man framed me. I swear it. He . . ."

"Sit down!"

I'd come part way out of the chair. I felt like something had busted loose inside of me. It was tearing me up.

"Tell you what, Shchapov," Turner said tiredly. "You plead guilty on this thing and I'll try to make a deal with the County Attorney. It just so happens that the woman involved has a pretty unsavory reputation. Because of that maybe I can . . ."

"I didn't do it, Sheriff."

"You're making a mistake," Turner said. "If you cooperate I can help you."

"I don't need any help. I'm innocent."

I sat there, shaking.

The phone rang.

Turner picked it up and sat listening for several seconds with the receiver cradled under his chin. He mopped his face with the handkerchief. A fly droned somewhere in the room.

" . . . damn right, book him," Turner was saying. "Then call Judge Atherton to set bail. Yeah. Right. I don't care about that. Book him."

He hung up.

"Okay, Shchapov."

"What?"

"You're free to go," Turner said. "If you're smart, you'll keep right on going, clear out of the county."

I sat there.

"Mind telling me why the sudden change?" I said.

"Not at all. We just got a confession from a guy in the next room. So that makes you clean . . . *this time*. But let me tell you something, mister. We don't like your kind in Hemetville. We don't like sex perverts coming to town and molesting our women. Now beat it."

"Sure, Sheriff."

I got up and opened the door.

"Schchapov!"

"What?"

"I'll be watching you."

When I got to the store the following morning, Hitt stood waiting for me in the doorway, frowning.

I felt awful.

"You're late," Hitt said.

"Sorry."

"And, Johnny . . ."

"Huh?"

"Tell your girl friends not to call during business hours. Some broad's been asking for you ever since I opened the doors."

I grabbed a rag and began scrubbing the doors of the cooler. Hitt was a fanatic about keeping the

store spic and span. It was a carry-over from his days in the Navy. When I was finished with the doors I'd go back and sweep off the loading dock. It was all part of the routine.

The phone rang.

"Johnny?"

"Yes."

"I've been trying to get you all morning. You've had me darn near crazy. Is everything . . ."

"You shouldn't call here," I said. Hitt was scowling at me, scratching his head. "You'll get me in trouble."

"I had to. Did you take care of . . . the package?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"Goddammit, yes!"

"When will I see you?"

"Maybe tonight."

"Now. I want to see you now, Johnny."

I hung up.

I had to think.

Harry had come up with a pretty good idea. But it wasn't that simple. You don't knock off a bank just because you have what you think is a pretty original gimmick. There's the rest of it. There's the problem of what you do afterwards, where you go, how you manage to disappear with a quarter of a million dollars.

And there was the problem of a stake. We'd need at least a couple of thousand dollars to finance an operation like this one.

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

I was broke.

Back in the storeroom, stacking booze crates, I tried not to think about it. It had begun to make me crazy. But the pictures kept running through my head anyway. I kept seeing the money stacked up in neat bundles, and machine guns chattering, and Lara. It was nuts.

Lunch came.

I walked uptown and went into a music store on Mainstreet. I hadn't reached any decision but I was curious about something. There was a plump teenager behind the counter. Colorless hair and eyes. Bright, purple lipstick. She showed me their complete line of tape recorders. I took a demonstrator into one of the sound booths and monkeyed around with it for a full half hour, saying anything that came into my mind, then playing it back and listening.

It didn't sound like me.

I erased the tape after a while and took the demonstrator back outside. I told the girl it wasn't just what I wanted and thanks and maybe I'd be back. Then I headed back to the store.

Hitt was waiting for me, looking nervous.

"There's somebody here wants to see you," he said.

"Who?"

He nodded.

It was Sheriff Turner. He was standing over by the magazine rack, leafing through one of the girlie books, sweat gleaming on his

face like chicken fat. I went over to him.

"Sheriff . . ."

"Just a minute."

He kept on with the magazine, turning leisurely from one page to the next, pausing occasionally to chuckle at a cartoon. He was enjoying himself. And he was enjoying making me stand there.

"You wanted me?" I said after a while.

He didn't answer, but kept turning the pages of the magazine, not even bothering to look at me.

I turned to walk away.

"Shchapov!"

He was looking at me now. I could feel the sweat running down the inside of my arms. His eyes were like small maggots burrowing into a lump of bread dough.

"It's a funny thing," he said. "When you've been dealing with people as long as I have you get so's you know 'em pretty good. Get so's you can size 'em up . . ."

"I don't get you."

"You beat it last night, Shchapov," he said. "The woman identified another man. But I know you were lying. So don't think . . ."

"Why would I be lying?" I said.

"That's the part I haven't got figured. But I will. And when I do, Shchapov, you'd better not still be around."

He went out.

I headed back for the store room. I felt lousy, let down and depressed, as if nothing mattered any

more. I felt as if I had grabbed a naked knife blade and was waiting for it to be jerked from my hand . . .

"Just a minute, Johnny."

It was Hitt. He came over to me, looking hang dog. He cleared his throat.

"I've been meaning to talk to you," he said. "Nothing personal, you understand. Fact is, I like you, Shchapov. You're a good worker. But business just hasn't been . . ."

"Turner got to you, eh?" I said.

"What?"

"The bastard. What'd he tell you?"

"Nothing."

Hitt's neck turned red.

I grabbed the front of his shirt. He came up on his toes and his face suddenly changed as if somebody had tossed acid into it. He was scared to death. Of me. Johnny Shchapov, sex maniac . . .

"He said you served time for rape," Hitt gulped.

"Hell of a nice guy."..

"I'm sorry, Johnny."

"Don't can me then," I said, releasing my grip. Suddenly I wanted the job. "Give me a chance."

"You know I can't do that, Johnny. I can't afford—I mean, if it got around that . . ."

"Forget it."

I got my check and got out of there. I went to a bar and sat drinking beer. The beer was lousy. The jukebox was on and the music was so tinny it seemed to be playing

under a pan lid. I spent the whole afternoon. People came and went.

A girl sat down beside me at the bar. She wore thin-strapped high heels and a transparent blouse. She reached over and patted my arm.

"Hot day," she said.

"Yeah."

"Maybe you'd like to buy me a cold beer."

"Maybe."

We sat drinking beer. Traffic honked by in the street outside. The bar began to fill with people getting off work.

The girl's perfume was making me sick. She was pretty awful. I waited until she excused herself to go to the can and then paid for the drinks and left.

I walked.

A colored kid sold newspapers on the corner. I bought one and glanced over the front page and, suddenly, there it was. It lept up at me as if it had been a snake folded up in the paper.

It was a three column picture of a dead guy with a woman's shower cap pulled down over his head.

Well, right then I wanted to run.

Because they'd found him. They'd found good old Harry.

Well, it got to me all right.

It got to me so bad it was a long time before I could even read the story. I stood there and the sweat popped out on my face.

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

"You okay, mister?"

It was the little colored kid.

"Sure, kid, sure. I'm fine."

The story didn't say anything. It was long on sensationalism and short on facts. It made a big thing of the adhesive tape around Harry's throat and the shower cap and the fact that he hadn't worn any clothes. But beyond that the police didn't know a thing. They hadn't even been able to make an identification.

A deaf old man had found the body. He'd been fishing for catfish and his hook had snagged the shower curtain, ripping it, and the rocks had come out and Harry had floated up underneath the old man's boat like garbage jettisoned from a submarine.

Sheriff Turner had come over from the county seat at Hemetville to take charge. The Alabama authorities had sent a man over from Clayton. There was some confusion as to just who had jurisdiction inasmuch as the body surfaced directly in the middle of the river.

I decided to leave town. The prospect of a quarter of a million dollars had begun to sound pretty good, but I wasn't completely crazy, not yet. I tossed the newspaper between a couple of parked cars and went back to my room at the motel.

Lara was waiting for me.

She had the big white Caddy convertible.

"I tried to call you at the store,"

she said. "They said you didn't work there any more but they told me where you lived. So I came over and waited."

"Well, I'm leaving," I said. "I'm clearing out."

"Why?"

"They found Harry."

"I know. I read about it in the paper. That was stupid of you, Johnny." She smiled at me. "Come on. We can take a drive and talk about it."

"No, thanks," I said.

I headed toward the motel.

"Johnny . . ."

I stopped and turned. She had leaned across the seat and opened the door. I looked at her sweater, at the way her nipples dotted the front of it, and swallowed.

". . . come on, honey."

I got in beside her and before the door closed she floored it and we shot off of the lot like a bullet, gravel spraying the underside of the car, slashing out into the flow of traffic. She knew how to drive. She handled the big car as if it were a toy.

"I'm really leaving," I said.

"We're both leaving," she said. "Just as soon as we get that money. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars . . ."

"Now. Tonight. I'm leaving tonight," I said.

"But, honey, that's silly."

"I've thought about it," I said. "It won't work."

"Sure it'll work."

"Get somebody else, then. You don't need me."

"No, I don't need you, but I want you. I told you, I like having you around . . ."

It was getting dark and she switched on the lights. We swept along the road. Wind rushed in through the windows and tossed her hair.

The speedometer needle moved to eighty. Then eighty-five. The engine whirled like a silently-ticking bomb.

"I guess I've got too many questions," I said. I had begun to feel foolish. "People just don't rob banks anymore. It isn't done."

"That's because they're greedy." She laughed softly in her throat. "They think in terms of the big city banks. City banks are no good. They've got guards all over the place and alarms a teller can touch off simply by moving his toe. And, then, there's the traffic. In a big city you're apt to get choked by it."

"Maybe, but . . ."

"Harry spent a whole year working out this deal. He figured everything: how to get into the bank without attracting attention, how to make the heist with a minimum of risk, and how to disappear afterward."

"A quarter of a million seems like a lot of cash for a small bank."

"I told you, it's mostly payroll cash. There are thousands of people employed by the fruit growers around Hemetville. That's one of

the things that makes it such a sweet deal . . ."

"It's just not that simple," I said.

"What?"

"Do you have any money?"

She gave me a look.

"We'll need at least a couple of grand to work with," I said. "We've got a lot of things to buy, and we'll need some operating cash for afterwards, just in case we have to wait a while before spending any of the bank dough."

"I've got a few hundred, Johnny. That's all."

"You see." I dug out my cigarettes and pushed in the dash lighter. "You haven't figured it out at all. You haven't even begun to figure the angles."

We drove.

"We'll sell the car," she said after a while.

"Huh?"

"The Caddy is worth plenty. We'll sell it and use the money to buy what we need."

"You must be crazy."

"Why not? The pink slip is in the glove compartment. All we have to do is sign the car over to you and forge Harry's name and then . . ."

"Jesus! You don't kill a guy and then go around forging his name. What if Turner identifies the body?"

"Turner?"

"The sheriff."

"You know him?"

She looked at me queerly.

"Yeah. I know him."

She hit the accelerator.

Small towns flapped by like wet sheets hanging on a clothesline. Smithville, Sumter, Huntington, La Cross, Ellaville, Putnam, Doyle, Buena Vista. We went through the night, humming.

"Okay," I said. "Suppose we manage to get rid of the car. Suppose we make the heist. What happens after that?"

"I've explained that."

"Tell me again."

"We disappear."

"How?"

"We just disappear. Change our names. Go someplace and start over . . ."

"Listen," I said. "You never start over. There's always something to come along and trip you up."

"Not if you're careful."

I said nothing for a while. She was crazy, all right, but she also had guts. She didn't scare.

Hell, she had more courage than a lot of men.

We stopped at a place just outside Tylor for sandwiches and beer. I watched her chewing and taking small swallows of beer. She was as relaxed as if we had stopped off for a Coke on the way home from a church social.

Going back, I drove.

We smoked. Lara's eyes changed color in the light from the dash. She didn't say anything and I knew it was because she wanted me to have time to think.

"What's it going to be?" she said finally. "Yes or no?"

I'd thought about it a lot, changing my mind back and forth, but down deep there had never been any doubt. I wanted the money. I wanted a chance at a decent life where people would accept me as a part of society.

"Yes," I said.

"I knew it would be," she said.

There wasn't anything else to say.

It was almost midnight when we pulled onto the lot outside my shack. The red neon sign over the office blinked alternately *Rose View Motor Hotel . . . WEEKLY RATES . . . Rose View Motor Hotel . . . WEEKLY RATES.*

I killed the big engine.

"When?" she said.

I began to sweat.

"As soon as we can."

"That isn't an answer."

"There are a lot of things we have to do," I said.

"This Friday, Johnny." There was something in her eyes. "Let's do it this Friday. Why wait? The longer we wait the more we . . ."

"That's crazy!"

"No it's not. Listen. It's Wednesday. We get rid of the car and do the other things we have to do tomorrow. Then, on Friday . . ."

"Jesus!"

She was right, of course. There wasn't any reason to wait. I snuffed my cigarette in the tray and felt my heart socking in my chest.

"Lara," I said.

"Uh-huh."

"There's something about me you ought to know. It may make a difference. I . . ." I grabbed for another cigarette and took it down half way with a single drag. "I've done time. I spent a couple of years in jail."

"What for?"

I felt hopelessly foolish. But I decided to give it to her off the top. There was no use trying to explain that I had been framed, that I hadn't really raped anybody, because there was no reason for her to believe me.

"I'm a convicted rapist," I said.

It sounded ridiculous.

She was watching me. Impulsively, she slid across the seat toward me, and I smelled her perfume. She was breathing funny.

"Show me," she said.

Thursday was busy.

I was up before dawn. I picked up the Cadillac, and after stopping for breakfast at a greasy spoon on Mainstreet, drove to Columbus. By nine o'clock I had sold the car for a little over four thousand dollars cash.

At the Greyhound depot, I bought a ticket to La Cross, a town about thirty miles north of Hemetville. The trip took just a little under forty-five minutes. I spent another hour shopping around the

used car lots, finally settled on a Ford wagon with plenty of soup under the hood, and was back in Hemetville in time for lunch.

I couldn't eat. But from my table in the cafe I had a good view of the bank. I tried to think clearly but by now my brain was like a piece of marinating liver. I watched people come and go through the thick glass doors, checked the flow of traffic in the street, watched a policeman directing traffic in an intersection near the library.

At twelve-thirty I paid for the lunch I hadn't eaten and crossed the street and walked into the bank.

I couldn't stop wiping the sweat from my face.

I looked around. Only a few customers were in the lobby. One side of the high, vaulted room was lined with teller's cages and the other with a low counter behind which sat several men at desks.

I went to the counter and stood there until one of the men left his desk and came over.

"My name is Lawford," I said. "I'd like to talk to one of your loan officers."

"Did you have anyone in particular in mind, Mr. Lawford?"

"No. Actually, I'm new in town. I . . ."

"Well, in that case, perhaps I can help you." The man had a face like a squeezed lemon. "My name is Gold. Harry Gold. If you'll just step this way . . ."

He opened a low swinging door

in the counter and stepped to one side so I could enter.

"I guess what I'm really looking for is advice," I told him. "My mother just died back east, leaving me with a fairly sizeable inheritance, and I'm sort of scouting around for an investment possibility. I guess I'd kind of like to own my own business. Always did like the idea of being my own boss. Nothing fancy, understand. Maybe a laundry or a filling station. That'd be pretty good, eh? A filling station?"

"What is the size of your inheritance, Mr. Lawford?"

"Thirty, maybe thirty-five grand. It'll be a week or so before everything is pinned down. But, like I said, it's a pretty good chunk of dough."

"And you wish to invest here in Hemetville?"

"I sure do. I've only been here a few months but I like it. It's a fine town. The people are fine."

The man smiled thinly.

"I'm sure we can help you," he said. "It's really just a matter of putting you in touch with some of our other bank customers. For example . . ."

I wasn't listening. My head nodded occasionally, and my mouth smiled at him, but my eyes were recording every detail they could absorb. The guard, the teller's cages, the arrangement of the desks were just as Lara had described them.

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

The marble floor was worn but highly polished. A second glass door, leading from the street on the far side of the lobby, was kept locked even during banking hours. An elaborate sunburst clock hung above the stairs leading down into the vaults.

"... of course, the character of the central business area is changing," Mr. Gold was saying. "Shopping centers and the modern freeway have made it far more difficult for the downtown businessman. However, for the far-sighted individual who..."

My eyes roamed. Not much activity at the teller's windows. Only a hand full of guys, junior officers of the bank probably, at desks behind the counter. The guard, a fat, sleepy looking Mexican who seemed to know most of the customers by name.

It took it all in.

Gold talked.

After a while I broke it off and made an appointment to come back at ten o'clock on the following day.

Friday.

I beat it up the street and bought the tape recorder I'd experimented with the day before. I picked up some more things at a dress shop. Then I got in the wagon and slammed out to Lara's.

Well, right then, she wanted to mess around.

She was that excited.

"Not now," I said. "We've got a million things to do."

I set up the recorder and spent maybe two full hours taping and reaping, timing everything with the big sweep hand on the kitchen clock, until I was sure I had what I wanted. I took the recorder into the bathroom and fired Lara's thirty-eight several times into the floor. I went into the kitchen, adjusted the volume while Lara banged the bottom of a washtub with a wooden spoon, recording it over the sound of the pistol shots. Then I played the finished tape so many times I thought Lara was going to go clean out of her mind. But it was necessary. Because everything had to be just right. Everything had to go off without a hitch.

I worried.

I sweated plenty.

I got out pencils and paper and drew dozens of maps and sketches, pointing out all the things I had seen in the bank, then making Lara play it all back to me until we both had it down like our middle names. We smoked. We drank some of the booze Lara had stashed around. Then we set up the recorder and listened and poured over the maps again, bit by bit, until I was sure we hadn't overlooked even one infinitesimal point.

"Johnny, I'm tired."

"Make some coffee."

We listened to the tape and drank the coffee.

I got out the stuff I'd bought at the dress shop. There was a hat

box and a couple of those huge handbags. I put the recorder in the hat box, flipped the switch, slammed the top on, listened, and it was no good. It was so lousy it stank. I sweated. I put the recorder in one of the handbags and it was better. But it still needed something. I got some towels from the kitchen and stuffed them around inside the bag. I turned up the volume. Perfect. I walked around the room, listening. The voice was good, precise, coming out of nowhere.

There was only the one gun, a thirty-eight, that Harry had carried in the glove compartment of the Caddy. The chambers were loaded. It gave me a funny feeling just to hold it. I checked the safety, sighted in on a lamp on the far side of the room, and wrapped it back in the towel.

"Johnny . . ."

She was looking at me, that heavy black hair falling around her face, and her eyes so nutty it was like somebody slamming me in the gut.

"We'd better try to get some sleep," I said.

I stretched out on the couch and lay there smoking. I tried to blank out my mind, but nothing happened. Thoughts kept slamming through my head. I saw Thelma in her old man's cafe in Huntsville. I heard her squealing up on the counter. I saw her old man swinging at me with the ketchup bottle.

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

Well, to hell with that life.

After tomorrow I wouldn't have to go to work every morning worrying about whether or not I still had a job. I wouldn't have to worry about what people thought about me. Because when you've got plenty of money people only think one thing:

Johnny Shchapov? Sure, I know him. Give you the shirt right off his back. Smart, too. Made himself a fortune in real estate down South somewhere. Owns a couple of liquor stores clean. What? Sure, I heard that, but I can tell you it's a bunch of crap. Guy like Johnny Shchapov? Why, he's one of the nicest guys you'd ever want to meet . . .

I was still awake, my mind full of doubt and worry, when the first light of dawn came slanting into the room.

We ate breakfast silently, waiting for the time to leave. Scrambled eggs, bacon, toast, black coffee. The circles under Lara's eyes looked as if they had been inked in and I knew that she probably hadn't slept either.

"You sure you have everything straight?" I asked her.

"Yes."

"When do you enter the bank?"

"At exactly ten-fifteen."

"Then what?"

"I leave the basket purse and go

back outside to the car." She looked at me. She had barely touched her breakfast. "At ten twenty-five you come outside with the money. I'll be in the car, waiting . . ."

"Where?"

"Directly across the street, in the loading zone in front of the drug store."

"Good."

"You look scared," she said.

"I am. I'm plenty scared."

We left the house at a few minutes before ten. I didn't want to have to wait around after we got downtown. On the way I got the shakes so bad I had to stop the car. I sat there, swallowing, trying not to get sick.

"Quit worrying," Lara said. She was squeezed up next to me, her hand pressing my leg. "It's going to be so easy, and then, all that money . . ."

I drove.

We passed the liquor store and I saw Hitt through the big window, talking to somebody, probably the new guy. Past the police station. Then the bank, gray and impregnable, like a solid block of granite.

Just the sight of it made my stomach flop inside me.

At the corner I got out and waited for Lara to slip over under the wheel.

"Don't forget," I said through the window. "You plant the recorder at exactly ten-fifteen."

She grabbed my face and ran her mouth over mine.

"Good luck, Johnny."

There was a public telephone in the candy store two doors down from the bank. I went into the booth and dialed. The clock on the wall at the back of the store said ten o'clock.

"Office of the County Sheriff . . ."

"I'd like to report something," I said. "My name is Harold Stanley and I . . ."

"One moment, please."

Seconds passed. I was late. I thought about hanging up and going on to the bank. Then a heavy male voice came onto the line.

"May I help you, Mr. . . ."

"Stanley. Harold Stanley . . ." I didn't have any trouble making my voice sound scared. "I know this sounds crazy, but, well . . ."

"What is it, Mr. Stanley?"

"I'm not sure. I'm a salesman, driving through on my way to Atlanta, and I passed this big gray house about seven miles east of town on Route 37 . . ."

"The McGivern place."

"There's a bunch of pecan trees around it, and . . ."

"That's the McGivern place, all right. Old Man McGivern always sends a big box of those pecans down here to the station at Christmas."

"Well . . ."

"What is it?"

"There's a guy hanging from one of the trees."

"Is this a joke?"

"I'm telling you, I saw him."

"Was he dead?"

"Sure. You damn right he was dead."

"Did you cut him down?"

"No, sir. I figured I'd better not touch anything. I just beat it to the nearest phone and . . ."

"We'll send a car right out there, Mr. Stanley. I'm afraid it will be necessary for you to come by the station and make a report, but we'll try not to detain you too long . . ."

"Sure. I'll be right there," I said.

I hung up.

There had been two cars on the lot when I passed the station. Now there would be only one. It was a small thing but it helped reduce the odds.

When I got to the bank, Gold met me at the little gate in the railing, looking pleased.

I guessed he'd been thinking about my thirty thousand dollars and about all of the ways the bank had figured to get their hands on it.

"Mr. Lawford. Well, well, well, *well*. I'm glad to see you. I think I've come across something that may prove interesting to you, that is, if you don't mind getting a little dirt on your hands."

He laughed and it was like a ripe melon busting.

We went back to his desk.

Out of the corner of my eye I watched the activity in the lobby of the bank. There were only a few customers at the teller's windows and at the chest-high tables that

held the blank checks and deposit slips. A man turned away from one of the windows carrying payroll money in a canvas sack.

Well, it gave me a funny feeling, all right.

Watching him take that money—*my money*—out of the bank, it was like a nightmare, when you want to holler or run after someone and you can't.

". . . don't you agree, Mr. Lawford?"

"Huh? What was that?"

"I was saying that there must be a great deal of satisfaction in working out of doors, right out where God intended us, doing things with our hands. Take a service station, for instance. Just last week we had to foreclose on the sweetest little piece of property you ever saw, and right on the freeway . . ."

Lara came in like clockwork.

She was something to watch. As cool as ice, her high heels echoing slightly over the marble floor, and a look on her face that was pure hell. She had the basket purse with her. She put it on the floor next to a woman who stood filling out a deposit slip, nudged it underneath with her foot as she picked up a pen, and winked at me.

I figured if Gold saw that wink we were finished, wiped out, right then and there.

Sweat began pouring off me.

Lara left the bank.

". . . I'm certain that an aggressive young man like yourself could

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turn this station into a real money-maker. We estimate the volume of traffic that passes it each day as nearly . . ."

I waited.

One full minute passed.

Christ, I thought, she's forgotten to start the recorder.

"Mr. Lawford, I was saying that . . ."

Then it came.

A voice.

It hung there in the big vaulted lobby like a cloud, so sharp and tangible, you could almost touch it.

Attention, everyone! This is a stickup! Please do exactly as directed. All tellers will immediately step back from their windows. You men . . . move away from your desks. Quickly! That's it. Now . . . everyone turn and face the wall. Remember, you are being covered by guns . . ."

I stood up with the others and faced the wall, my arms raised, watching the guard out of the corner of my eyes.

These were the crucial few moments.

If anything went wrong now, I could still walk out, could get away without suspicion.

The guard stood there, sweating. He glanced around quickly, trying desperately to locate the voice, his eyes like black darting bugs. He was frightened and confused. Finally he raised his hands slowly and turned toward the wall.

"*You, in the red shirt,*" the recorder said.

I felt black waves rolling through me. If I opened my mouth now, I was committed. I would have to go through with it.

"Me?" I said weakly. It came out in a croak. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yes, you . . ."

"But . . ."

"Do exactly as you're told. Walk around behind the teller's cages and collect the payroll sacks from the desks. Then . . ."

"Please," I said. "I don't even work here. I don't . . ."

The sound of a gun firing exploded against the marble walls. The recorded *bang* came off of the tape like a live bullet. I could almost hear it whistle past my ear.

"*Next time I shoot to kill,*" the recorder said. "*Now do as you're told . . ."*

"Sure, sure," I said in a cracked voice. "Don't shoot! Please, don't shoot!"

I moved like a rabbit. In a matter of seconds I was across the room, collecting the heavy money sacks. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the bank guard turning his head slowly from side to side, his neck pulled in as if he was cold, still trying to locate the source of the voice.

"*. . . pick that up!*" the recorded voice commanded suddenly.

Christ! I'd forgotten. I was supposed to have dropped one of the

sacks exactly fifty seconds after a cue word on the tape. Well, it was too late now . . .

The guard was watching me.

He began to chew his lip nervously, as if he had made a decision, and was afraid to find out if it was the right one.

"... take the sacks outside. There will be two men waiting for you on the sidewalk. The rest of you stay exactly where you are. We will continue to cover you for the next three minutes. If you move or make the slightest sound . . ."

I hit the sidewalk running.

As the big glass doors swung shut behind me. I heard the beginning of the last few feet of the tape.

It was something. The Fourth of July and Anzio and The Untouchables all wrapped up into one. It was like fireworks going off in the belly of a whale. Enough noise and confusion to occupy the people in that bank for the rest of their lives.

I dashed out into traffic. Lara was waiting in the wagon. I grabbed open the door.

"Drive!" I shouted.

We shot away from the curb. I looked back just as the bank guard came running out onto the sidewalk carrying the basket purse and scrabbling for his gun. He fired a couple of shots up into the air. Lara put the accelerator to the floor and held it.

We turned a corner. The car sped through a slum area of tar-

paper shacks and dirty, fenced yards. The tires screamed over a rutted, dirt track that led sharply uphill and onto a stretch of straight highway.

Then she really opened it up.

I began to shake like crazy.

Heat.

It was all around us, blazing from a white sky, rising up from the road like cellophane snakes.

I didn't remember ever having felt anything to compare with it.

We stopped on the outskirts of Columbus, transferred the money to two suitcases, and tossed the payroll sacks away in the pines. Then we crossed the Chattahoochee River into Phenix City. I used the remainder of the money we had gotten for the Caddy to buy a '55 T-bird. The cops would be looking for the wagon. We left it on a side street by a bottling plant and headed west in the T-bird on Highway 80.

We drove steadily for most of the day, trading off, staying exactly ten miles under the limit as planned.

The towns clicked by.

Marvyn, Tuskegee, Montgomery, Uniontown, Prarieville. We hit Mississippi just before nightfall. Meridian, Newton, Forest.

At Morton we stopped at a motel, a medium-priced place where we could spend the night, clean up

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and begin to change our identities.

Inside, I put the two suitcases on the floor.

It was funny. The suitcases were all we had. No clothes. Not even a toothbrush. Just the suitcases filled with money. A quarter of a million dollars . . .

We sat there counting it.

The light from the lamp glowed on the bed.

She began to get that look in her eyes. She smiled, red lips drawn back across her teeth, with an expression that was something between lust and insanity. The neck of her blouse was open and I could see the faint sheen of perspiration on her throat, the startling contrast between her tan and the white, swollen breasts.

"Johnny, honey . . ."

She sprawled back on the bed, waiting, the money crinkling beneath her.

It was wild and crazy and when it was over we lay there and listened to the big diesels rumbling past on the highway, tapping their air brakes, barreling west.

"Do you love me?" she said.

"Yes."

I reached for her and she rolled sideways.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I've told you. California."

"Where in California?"

"I don't know. San Diego. Fresno."

"And then?"

"Then we disappear. We become

two different people. We buy a house and start living normal lives . . ."

"I don't think I'd like that, Johnny."

"Huh?"

"I don't think I'd like living a normal life."

I lit a cigarette and lay there, smoking. After a long time I moved. I went into the dinky bathroom and started the shower water. There was a sliver of soap in the rusty soap dish and I used it to lather every inch of my body. When I had rinsed I turned on the water full cold. The spray was like icy whips lashing me.

"A quarter of a million dollars," I said aloud and it came back to me in the cramped cubicle. "*A quarter of a million dollars.*"

They say you can never imagine that much money.

Suddenly I imagined it. I saw it in there on the bed with Lara. Thick green bundles of it.

And right then it hit me like a club coming down on my head. Maybe it was the icy water. But suddenly I realized what I'd done. It was crazy, insane. Because you don't steal a quarter of a million dollars and get away with it. You never get away with it . . .

Lara was still naked when I came out of the bathroom.

I looked at her and right away I could see it had gone wrong. My head throbbed. I looked at the door and wondered if I could make it but it was too far.

Too far . . .

She looked at me soberly.

She leaned forward on her knees in the middle of the bed, the money spread out around her on the cheap chenille spread, like green scales that had fallen away to expose the evil princess. She was something. Black hair down around her face, breasts thrust forward, red-tipped fingers caressing the handle of the thirty-eight.

"I'm sorry, Johnny." She smiled at me, and I think she really meant it, really meant that she was sorry. "I like you. I really like you. But you should have had more sense. Because, don't you see, the money would always be there between us."

She smiled at me and shrugged.

It was foolish but I did the only thing I could.

I went for her.

The bullet smacked across my ribs, slamming me backwards against the wall and I slid down to the floor. I tried to move and couldn't. I opened my mouth to scream at her as a curtain of darkness dropped across my mind.

Pain.

Then a delirious babbling. My own. I felt as if my body was filled with acid consuming me from inside. Blood had dribbled down my side and soaked into the worn carpet. My leg was twisted up under

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me, the thigh resembling a beheaded torso, and I sat staring at it through a red cloud.

I tried to move and felt the impact of the bullet all over again.

Lara!

She was gone. The money was gone. I was alone with the pain.

For how long?

I dragged myself to my feet, swaying, and staggered to the door. The T-bird wasn't on the lot. But she couldn't be too far ahead. She'd had to dress and stuff the money back into the suitcases. And she'd stay on Highway 80, at least for a while, because that had been part of the plan . . .

Suddenly, I had to find her.

I pulled on my clothes.

I staggered outside. There was a Buick parked in front of C7. A big, powerfully built car that looked as if it had plenty of guts.

I opened it and fumbled around beside the steering column. No keys. I had begun to bleed again and I could feel the sweat standing out on my face and neck.

I stumbled over to C7 and banged loudly on the door.

Nothing.

Then I heard someone moving inside.

"Who is it?"

"Police."

The door opened.

"Thank God you're here, officer. Something terrible is going on next door. Something . . ."

It was a woman. When she saw

me her mouth fell open. She had stale hair and stale eyes and a stale, colorless face.

"Oh, my God," she pleaded.

I shoved her back into the room and followed her.

A man sat upright in one of the twin beds.

"The car keys," I said and it came out in a croak. "Give them to me . . . quick!"

"Please! Please don't kill us!"

I grabbed the old woman by the neck and shook her.

I spotted the keys on the dresser. They lay next to a pint bottle of bourbon. I grabbed up the bottle and drank some of it down, feeling the heat spread out from my stomach, jolting some warmth into me. Then I went out to the car.

I could hear the old woman's screams behind me. I shoved the key into the ignition and the engine caught with a sudden throb of power. The tires drowned the screaming as they clawed into gravel and I shot out onto the road.

I no longer felt any pain. My mind was a vacuum, empty even of fear. I pushed the accelerator all of the way to the floor. I fought the wheel, fighting with my remaining strength to keep the car on the road, slamming through the night like an express train gone suddenly wild.

I snapped on the radio.

"... police are still without clues tonight in what may be the state's most daring robbery in the

past half century. Using a cleverly-concealed machine, on which he had recorded menacing commands and the frightening sound of exploding gunfire, an unidentified man single-handedly robbed the Security Trust Bank of Hemetville this morning of . . ."

I drove.

It came at me out of the radio. Crazy and unbelievable. It raced through my mind until I was nearly crazy with it. It didn't seem possible that they could be talking about me.

"... roadblocks have been erected in Florida, Georgia and Mississippi in the hope that..."

They wouldn't stop. They'd come after me, carefully and methodically, and there wouldn't be anything I could do. There wouldn't be anyplace to hide. Because they just don't let you get away with robbing a bank.

"... helicopters scouring the delta regions along the Gulf. Small boat owners have been asked to cooperate . . ."

I turned off the radio.

I didn't want to think about anything but Lara. The rest of it didn't make any difference. Not anymore.

I drove. The pain began to come back. It throbbed through me like slivers of broken glass.

Suddenly, I saw something on the side of the road. It was the red T-bird. I came down on it in a rush, almost sped past it in the darkness, and was thrown forward

as I came to a skidding stop. I sat there, shaking. I saw the red dome-light of a police car shining ahead of me through the darkness.

A roadblock.

That's why Lara had stopped. She'd seen the revolving red light and had decided to abandon the T-bird rather than risk being searched. It was crazy. Probably she was going to try to circle the roadblock on foot and catch a ride farther down the highway.

She must be out of her head, I thought. I saw her in my mind, dragging the suitcases out of the car, damn near crippled under the weight of them. I thought, she can't possibly make it, not on foot, not in a million years. She must have panicked. She must have seen the light and gone completely nuts.

I went after her.

There was nothing else for me to do, because I couldn't make it through the roadblock, not with a bullet in me.

I dropped out of the car and rolled down a steep incline into a ditch. I lay there and sweated. I could feel the blood flowing out of me into the weeds.

Beyond the trees were some railroad tracks, about thirty yards from the road, running parallel with it.

I crawled up on the tracks and began walking west. My insides felt as if they had been ripped to shreds. My feet slipped over the heavy wooden ties. I lurched des-

perately along. Something gave in my leg and I went down, sprawling, my face pressed against the cold steel of the rail.

When I pulled myself to my knees I saw her.

From my low angle of vision she was a fuzzy silhouette up there in the moonlight against the sky.

I yelled something and went after her.

It was like a nightmare. She was about fifty yards ahead of me, following the tracks, half dragging the suitcases behind her. I could hear them bumping over the ties.

Thunk . . . thunk . . . thunk . . .

Sweat poured down me and mixed with the blood. The pain was there but I couldn't feel it. There was no room in my brain for anything but Lara and the money.

With the money I could have been something, I thought.

With the money I could have made it.

I kept falling down.

Sometimes I just crawled along. But she didn't get much farther ahead. The suitcases slowed her down. I staggered and lurched. Blood started flowing out of my mouth. I could feel the strength leaving me and I knew that if I went down many more times I wouldn't be able to get up.

"Lara!"

She hesitated once, looking around, and I thought she was going to come back to me.

But she continued on.

"DON'T TEMPT ME!"

Thunk . . . thunk . . .

I ran after her. The blood pumped from my side and I knew it might kill me. But I ran. The pain started in again and it was like a pointed stake thrust into my guts. I heard a shriek and knew it was me. My head began to throb as if it had turned into a bloody boil.

In a matter of minutes I reached her. She dropped the suitcases and ran on without them. But she had waited too long. My legs rattled against one of the suitcases, and as I fell forward, I grabbed out wildly.

We sprawled forward on the tracks, my hand clasped like iron to her ankle. I held on with every bit of my remaining strength. She screamed at me, wild, her words lost in the wind.

I was sick with pain and it was becoming difficult for me to keep my thoughts straight. I tried to see through the darkness and couldn't. I knew that if I let go, if I loosened my grip, I would not have the strength to chase after her again.

I moaned as she brought down a stone against my hand, swinging again and again, trying futilely to tear herself free. She screamed at me. After a while she let go of the stone and lay there, panting.

"Please, Johnny!" Her voice came to me through a red haze.

"I'll do anything you say. Anything. You can have the money. Just let me go. Please . . ."

I really held on then.

But I knew I couldn't last forever. In an hour, a couple of hours, there would no longer be enough blood in me to feed the muscles in my hand. I lay there, sobs racking my body, feeling nothing but the pain and a sense of lonely desolation.

Tears came to mingle with the blood on my face. Because I knew I had lost. Because in the end she would walk away with the money, with everything, and leave me there too weak to do anything but die.

And then I heard the answer.

It came rushing at us out of the night, roaring like an enraged monster, clanking at us. At first I thought the roaring might be only in my mind. But then the ground began to tremble beneath me and I was able to raise my head to stare into the brilliance of the searchlight, charging at us between the shining ribbon of the tracks.

I held on desperately as Lara began to scream.


And as I closed my eyes I felt the laughter bubbling up out of me with the blood. Because I'd won after all. In spite of the cost, I had won . . .



Queer Siren


BY C. L. RODERMAN

It seemed his wife didn't understand him . . . but his wife's secretary did.



BESIDE the pool, Warren Pender lay prostrate in a chaise longue, a Jack Daniels precariously perched upon the arm rest. A hot, incessant sun beat down to numb his brain and the world seemed to be grinding to a halt. Madelaine approached him in slow motion through the heat vapors that danced upon the multi-colored tiles surrounding the pool.

Her long ebony hair bounced lazily and her thin linen dress, X-rayed by the sun, revealed an athletic but soft, yielding body. As she floated toward him, he could see the firm



thigh muscles stretch and contract in a primitive ritual.

Now she stood over him, mixing a dash of soda into a fresh Jack Daniels. "Ruth just left for the Children's Hospital. She sends her love," Madelaine said.

She leaned to hand him the drink and he saw she wore no bra beneath the dress.

His hand trembled as he reached for the glass, his unblinking eyes hypnotized by the full, inviting breasts. Some of the drink sloshed over the side of the glass and trickled onto his fat, hairy belly, beaded and quickly dried. Madelaine dipped her hand in the pool and then stroked her long fingers through the sticky, matted hair—his skin excited by her touch.

But there was time; Ruth was gone for the day. And Warren Pender savored the preliminaries to infidelity.

He thought how different this instinctively sensuous woman was from his wife who recoiled each time he approached her. Madelaine, dark and European, passionate and wild—and Ruth, blonde, Nordic, frigid.

Her name dredged up the frustrations of his marriage. Memories inundated his mind but the whisky dissipated them into staccato phrases.

"... 22 years ... I'm 22 years older than Ruth ... she thinks I'm a repulsive old man or something ... I'm only 48 ... in my

prime ... you'll see ..."

"I know darling," Madelaine said.

"Ruth thinks I'm crude," he said, closing his eyes to shut out the sun, now spinning crazily in the sky. "... you dirty me ... you paw and clutch at me she says ... right from the start ... first I thought a lover ... too aloof for that ... once I even accused her ... Warren she says, culture is my lover ... its pleasures of the spirit I seek, not those of the flesh ... can't even talk like a woman ..."

Give me another drink," he demanded.

"You've had too much already." Madelaine spoke to him like a mother reprimanding her favorite son. "Look the bottle is almost empty. I wish you wouldn't drink so much."

"O.K. honey ... anything you say," he mumbled. The sun and whisky had drained him and he fell silent, his thoughts his own ... much worse past two years ... the charities ... take all her time ... me sneaking off to whores ... Warren she says it's the responsibility of the rich to provide for the poor ... so holy ... so generous with my money ... one damn charity after another ... Warren she says I need a secretary to help me ... one damn secretary after another ... all pretty ... all unapproachable ... until Madelaine ..."

He opened his eyes and spoke to her. "You're the best secretary a man's wife could have." Her smile stirred him.

"Damn it's hot," he said. "Let's go to my room . . . air conditioned . . ."

She smiled again. "Darling, how about a swim first."

" . . . hate the water, Madelaine . . . never swim . . . another drink honey."

"No. You've had enough. I want you to swim with me." She was insisting now.

"Anything but that, honey," he said, reaching for the Jack Daniels. He grasped the bottle and stopped, transfixed. Madelaine was tugging at the zipper that ran down the front of her dress. She shrugged her shoulder and the linen dress slithered down the smooth flesh and crumpled in a heap about her ankles. Her lithe body glowed in the sun. She stretched out her arms toward him, then drew them slowly in and wantonly cupped her full breasts. "Warren . . . I want you."

The bottle of Jack Daniels shattered on the tiles as Warren Pender stumbled to his feet. Now she was at the pool side, poised to dive. She

parted the water like a knife.

Detective Person folded his note book and tucked it into his coat pocket. "I'm sorry Mrs. Pender. Evidently, your husband had too much to drink while you and the girl were out driving. He decided to swim, slipped and hit his head when he fell in the pool. I'm sorry. We won't bother you again."

"That is very kind of you. If that is all, Madelaine will show you the way out."

"It's O.K. I can find my way," Detective Person said.

The two women were silent until they heard the door close.

"Madelaine, was it terrible . . . Did he . . ."

"No the whisky made him very manageable."

Ruth spoke in a husky whisper "No, that's not what I meant . . ."

Madelaine smiled. "He never touched me, Ruth."

Ruth squeezed Madelaine's hand and fumbled to unzip the thin linen dress, impatient to touch the athletic but soft, yielding body.



TWO-WAY PATSY

*He ran his own charter boat. It was a good, free life
... until he took Rita Corsico for a moon-light cruise.*



BY JOHN H. GOEB

SHORTLY after 10 A.M. Smiley, the turnkey on the day shift came around and called me through the bars. I knew it was after 10, because two of the boys in the D-tier had been brought downstairs for their trial. They had broken into a model home in Commack and had been caught by an off-duty cop. Today was D-Day for them.

Smiley grinned. "You've got visitors, Popeye, let's get going, time's money."

I thought this over for a moment: me having visitors? I did not have a soul in the world, and my buddies from the harbor had given up visiting me a long time ago. I did not have a wife, and most of my female acquaintances would carefully avoid anything which smelled of cops and law and prison.

"What do you mean by visitors, Smiley?"

"I'll tell you on the way down, let's move," Smiley replied while unlocking the door. We shuffled along the corridor to the elevator. Once in the elevator, I could not hold back.

"What's up, Smiley?"

"I should not tell you this, kid,"

said Smiley in a low voice, "but something big is up. There are a couple of Fed's in the warden's office, and they want to have a chat with you, real friendly-like."

I mulled this bit of information over. I never was an Einstein, otherwise I would not be in the predicament I was in now, and the endless weeks in this concrete madhouse, this hellhole of steel bars and sweaty mattresses, with its smells of disinfectant and urine, the nights interrupted by screams and the shouting of the prison guards, had left me in a state of stupefaction. To begin with, I still could not fully understand why I was here, my head injury still caused occasional blackouts, the medical care I had received was a bit on the superficial side, and my court-assigned lawyer seemed to have gone on a permanent vacation. To say the least, I was in a king-sized jam. I had, like my old bos'un on the U.S.S. Catfish used to say, goofed royally.

Smiley led me to the warden's waiting room, pushed me onto a bench and stationed himself over me with his arms folded. After a

while the warden himself opened the door and motioned me inside. I blinked in the unaccustomed bright daylight when I stumbled in the room. I took one look around and whistled inwardly. Heavy leather chairs, a rug, pictures on the wall. Some people still did live in comfort. Not that I ever cared for a great deal of comfort myself, living aboard my boat permanently, but a window without bars and a floor with a rug on it could safely be called comfort by a guy in my present situation.

Right then I noticed the two men on the leather sofa. They wore dark business suits, unobtrusive ties and black oxfords. I sensed by the bland looks they gave me that they were Federal agents.

The warden pointed to a straight-backed chair in front of his desk. I sat down, pulling my little bag of Bull Durham out of a shirt pocket. The warden nodded imperceptibly.

"Here, have a tailor-made," said one of the Federal men flipping a pack of Pall Mall in my lap. This took me by surprise. Kindness was a rare commodity in jail. I squeezed a hoarse "Thank you" through my throat. I was more confused than ever.

"Now let's see, you are Christof Peddersen," the younger one of the Federal agents read off a sheet he had taken out of an open attache case. "You are 41 years old, single, an American citizen, and the owner of a 46-foot charter vessel named

Medusa." He lifted his eyes off the page and gazed at me. I nodded.

"You are held as a material witness to the disappearance of one Rita Corsico, who disappeared from your boat during the night of August 14, 1962 under very mysterious circumstances, in fact, under circumstances so unusual, that the District Attorney ordered you held without bail."

I nodded dumbly and said, "That's about the size of it." "Now, there are certain facets of this case," the Federal agent continued, "which interest us and we would like to hear the whole story from you. Please be reminded, that you do not have to make any statements which could be held against you, but it would be in your own interest as well as in ours, if you were to tell us the truth."

"I will, sir," I replied, fumbling to get a cigarette out of the pack and lighted. I inhaled deeply and sat back. The first long drag on the cigarette made me dizzy. "It was like this, you see," I said and began to sort out in my mind the sequence of events, which led me on a weird and bizarre journey, to come to a highly undesired end in the county jail.

It was one of those hot, humid and oppressive nights we have during the midsummer season on Long Island. I had by boat tied up in its customary slip behind Chet's Porthole Bar and Grill on

the east side of East Rockaway channel. The Porthole was my headquarters. Chet forwarded telephone calls for me, kept me supplied with ice, beer and food, and I in turn supplied him with fresh fish and customers. Chet also acted as my public relations man, banker and advertising agent. It was a most congenial arrangement.

Of course Chet, at times a slightly transparent cat, benefited from this cozy deal too. Every time I returned with my charter parties from a days fishing, we all wound up invariably around Chet's horse-shoe bar, toasting each other and telling tall tales about the real big one that got away. I had built up a substantial clientele over the years, and many of my steady passengers sailed with me season after season. In wintertime I went to Florida and worked out of the smaller, less crowded ports on the east coast. All in all, it was a nice living. I owned the Medusa free and clear, my insurance was always paid up, and I lived on the boat, so my overhead was really very low. I even had a few bucks put by for a rainy day. Of course, once in a while I went on a bender, but hell, a guy has to enjoy himself too. Naturally, the squares in town took a dim view of me and my waterfront buddies. Let's face it, we are a rugged bunch, and I can't blame people who don't know us well enough for thinking of us as a gang of good-for-nothing loafers.

Well, speaking of my buddies, here I was sitting at Chet's horse-shoe bar with Steen Andersen, the block-head who owns the boat yard further down the channel, Eric Finn and Red Kirsten, a pair of lunatic clam diggers who house in a wind-blown leaning-shack in the marshes, and most of all, Big Jim O'Neill, the crazy Scotsman, who also happens to be the best motor mechanic from Sheepshead Bay to Shinnecock, that is, when he feels like working. They tell a story around the waterfront: when he was born, his mother wrapped him in oil-soaked cotton wipers and fed him bilge water, Diesel fuel and bearing compound. At any rate, Big Jim has bones made of Swedish steel, the stomach capacity of a garbage scow and a voice like a steam whistle educated by a Brooklyn stevedore. He lives in an old shanty behind the boatyard, and judging by the shade of his skin, his guts are filled with old crank-case oil. However, in town he is best known for a blasphemous quality of speech.

Well, so here we were perched on our bar stools not much unlike a flock of dirty birds, batting the breeze and hoisting a few. Chet was presiding on a tall stool behind the bar, his favored spot, chewing a big black cigar. The talk drifted around idly, from the channel buoys the Coast Guard had placed in a different spot this year in Reynold's Channel to the size of flukes

they were catching this summer off Number 4 at the Inlet, and finally—or I should say inevitably—the talk centered on theme one: Sex.

Chet did not contribute to that part of the conversation. We all knew of his slightly illicit romance with a married but as yet undivorced waitress, so this subject was taboo. Eric Finn and Red Kirsten were too old for sexual activities, and Steen Andersen was a happily married grandfather several times over. Since I had as a rule long ago clamped a tight security lid over my endeavors in that field—which had gotten me quite a reputation as a rogue—Big Jim was telling some lurid details of past conquests. Just about then the screen door creaked and six heads turned in unison to face the newcomer.

Big Jim let out a slow whistle, and then the crickets outside in the tall weeds stopped their concert. Even Chet removed the cigar from his mouth and parked it on a huge brass ash tray. Blockhead Andersen sucked his breath noisily.

Eric Finn, who had gulped a mouthful of beer got some of it in his windpipe and started wheezing. Red Kirsten's jaw dropped, spittle dripping from toothless gums. I shook my head to clear the brain from the alcohol fumes which had collected under my skull. But the lovely apparition was still there. In fact, she came slinking across the dirty floor. Her high

heels grated, yet she seemed to float in the hot air weightlessly. She wore a tight white summer dress, which must have been sprayed on. I could not imagine how she could have gotten into it otherwise. The dress was cut low on the top, exposing perfect shoulders and accentuating ample bosoms. She was tall, yet her hips were, I fished for the right word,—oh well, I had read it once in a glamor magazine, and you know how those fiction writers exaggerate to give their heroines the right build-up.

Well, they were supple. That's the word. Whatever it means. But she had it, and then some to spare. It spelled sex in large capital letters, sex and class too, from the gleaming blue-black hair combed back austere, the strong oval face, the cinnamon skin, the slender proud neck, to the beautifully molded body, to the long slim legs, the slender ankles of a thoroughbred, to the small feet with the coral-red toes. She carried an overnight case, a small clutch bag wedged under one arm, and a portable radio in the other hand.

She stepped up to the bar, placed the radio and the overnight case on the floor and slid cat-like onto a bar stool. Her tight dress slipped up, revealing an edge of black lace. Momentarily it took my breath away.

The girl placed her clutch bag on the bar, took a cigarette from a

silver cigarette case and stuck it between her lips. Instantly Chet sprang into action, flourishing a match. She accepted the light gracefully, blew out the smoke and thanked him with a sly smile.

"May I serve you, miss?"

Now look here, I thought, how the old coot falls all over himself with the cultivated speech. Normally Chet spoke mostly in grunts, the angle of his cigar indicating the meaning of the syllables like a semaphore.

"Gin and tonic, please."

With an agility which belied his otherwise cumbersome movements Chet whipped a glass out from under the bar, ice cubes tinkled, gin sloshed and the tonic mix hissed over the ice cubes. The girl pointed a dollar bill across the bar with a long slender finger. I noticed her finger nails; they were very narrow and long, the color of the nail polish matching her toes. She has class, I thought again, breeding and class. The girl lifted the glass, sipped some of the liquid, put the glass down and looked around. Immediately the spell was broken.

Eric Finn and Red Kirsten got busy with their beers, Andersen lit his pipe and Chet made change. Even the crickets resumed their concert. Big Jim scratched his bristly gray hair noisily and studied his drink.

"So as you were saying, Jim," prodded Chet, a faun-like smirk

on his face "so you were there in Maracaipo in that house, and then what happened?"

"Oh shut up, you jerk!" hooted Big Jim, his face turning the color of a nice, appetizing lobster, "can't you see there's ladies in the place?"

"I guess there was ladies in that place too," said Chet drily and picked up his cigar. Big Jim tossed down his drink and slapped the empty glass on the bar. I could see the gears in his big shaggy head mesh. The way I knew Big Jim, he would now try his level Scotch best to make time with the girl. I sat back and relaxed, watching the fun. While Chet refilled Big Jim's glass Big Jim got his plan of action all laid out orderly in his head, the way he would lay out the parts of a carburetor before assembling the thing. Big Jim cleared his throat, huffed and puffed a moment or two, and then came what I knew would come.

"Say, miss, did you get that nice tan on the beach today?"

It was not a very artful approach, but Big Jim had his own methods and, in a roundabout way, did alright for himself. The girl looked at him with wide innocent eyes.

"No, this is the natural color of my skin." Well, that fixes you, Big Jim, I thought.

"Blow me down," said Big Jim, shaking his head in mock wonderment. "I could have sworn you were on the beach all day, or at

least you were out on the boat. Sure look like it." I knew by then which tack Big Jim had taken. If you can't make it in the port tack, lay over on starboard and come around again . . .

The girl promptly fell for it. "In fact," she replied, "I have never been out on a boat."

"What, you've never been out on a boat?" Big Jim drew himself up to his entire six feet and six inches. He made a wide expansive sweep with his glass. "Did you blokes hear that, she has never been out on a boat. Now isn't that a cryin' shame. Why miss, I will take you out on a boat myself, anytime you say so. Just say you want to go, I take you out right now."

The girl gazed at him steadily. "You would?"

"Why sure I would, right now," strutted Big Jim.

The girl kept gazing at him. "That is very generous of you. In fact, I would enjoy a boat ride right now. Where is your boat?"

There was a moment of pregnant silence. Eric Finn broke it first, bursting out in a high-pitched horse-laugh. Red Kirsten seconded him with the cackling sounds of very old men. Blockhead Andersen slapped his thigh and guffawed. Chet only grinned like a fox. The girl was taken aback by the unexpected effect of her question. "Did I say something wrong?"

"No, miss, you didn't," Andersen assured her in a fatherly man-

ner. "It just happens that Big Jim here doesn't own a boat at all."

The general laughter started all over again. Even I could not keep from chuckling. Only Big Jim stood stone-faced, swishing the liquid in his glass. Little by little, in bursts and fits, the laughter died down. I could see Big Jim had not yet thrown in the sponge.

"It's true, miss," he agreed finally, "I don't own a boat. But me friend here, Captain Popeye, he owns the best boat on the entire South Shore. Just look out here," he pointed at the window overlooking the channel, "see her out there?"

The girl craned her neck. "The big white one right in front?" "The very same," confided Big Jim proudly, his chest swelling. "Now how would you like to go on a moonlight cruise in that?" The girl beamed back at him. "I would like very much."

But there also was a question in the girl's voice. Big Jim's antennae picked it up correctly, and he had his answer ready.

"Captain Popeye, who is me best buddy in this world," he turned to me, "aren't you, Popeye? Captain Popeye, you would not have any objections now, would you, if I take this here beautiful lady out on your boat right now, would you?"

I am not very fast on the uptake much of the time, but this time I had formulated my opinion. This process had been considerably

speeded up by the nerve Big Jim had so far displayed, which was even bigger than his physical proportions. And furthermore, if anybody was to take this gorgeous creature out on my boat, it would be little old me and nobody else. Aye aye, sir, Captain Chris Peddersen, also affectionately known as Popeye and by less complimentary monickers, Peddersen the Admiral himself would take this Latin goddess out on his barge. I let Big Jim have it square between the eyes: "In a pig's rear end I will!"

Big Jim plopped his glass on the bar. His face turned livid. "Why you lily-livered little Dutch good-for-nothing pirate, yer refusing me a simple little favor, me, who slaved over yer stinkin' worn-out crap mills what yer got fer engines in yer bleedin' dink oot there, why yer penny-pinchin' lazy bum . . ." His speech, having gone completely back to his native mother tongue, was drowned out in a gale of laughter which swept the room.

"Alright," I said, "I know I am lazy and a good-for-nothing, but I paid you on the barrel-head for every job you did on my engines, so save your steam. And for the rest of it, you know very well, nobody takes my boat out but myself. She's all I've got, and you know that."

Big Jim downed his drink, collected his change and left without a word.

"Did I provoke ill feelings be-

tween you and your friend?" asked the girl in the ensuing silence. She seemed to be genuinely concerned.

"No," I replied, "Big Jim and I know each other for too long. This little interlude will blow over and tomorrow he'll have forgotten it. Don't worry your pretty head over it. Here, have a drink on me." I motioned to Chet, who got himself busy with our drinks.

"By the way, my name is Chris Peddersen and I am the skipper of the Medusa, which you see out there. I am a partyboat skipper."

She looked at me puzzled. "Your name does not sound American."

"No, it isn't," I explained. "My people came over from Denmark many years ago. Incidentally, what's your name?"

"Rita Corsico, but you may call me Rita. All my friends do."

"Pleased to meet you, Rita," I grinned, "I appreciate that."

We toasted each other. The girl was alright, a good cat, even though she had a slight foreign accent. But that made her the more interesting. With the exception of a slightly licentious German housemaid, who had been an occasional overnight guest on my boat, my circle of female acquaintances had thus far not included any foreigners with intriguing accents. It suddenly became very important to me, that I should cultivate the best of relations with my new friend. Shucks, what Big Jim had intended with her, I might as well try

myself, even though I sat here unshaved, wearing dirty khakis, beat-up sneakers and a sunbleached yachting cap. Such a lovely dish would not come across my bow again for a long time. The usual run-of-the-mill females I was used to seeing were the lusher who hung out in the Porthole at night, or the overweighted wives stuffed in Capri pants some of my male passengers brought on board, or once in a while some pampered sugar dolls my wealthy sugar daddy passengers brought along for a day on the briny, and who without fail either got seasick or bored or both after two hours on the water, and for whom I had a healthy dislike. Come to think of it, I hadn't had myself a decent romp in the sack in weeks. Time to get your oil changed, I grinned inwardly. And here could be my chance. Why not, I had the boat all gassed up for the morning, when I expected a party from the city to come aboard. I had ice, beer and grub in the fridge, and a bottle of Haig & Haig in the locker up forward. Supposing I invited the girl for a spin in the boat down Reynolds Channel, the tide was slack for the next hour, we could anchor safely off Big Hassock for a couple of hours until the tide began to run out too strong. By midnight we could be back here, where I could get Rita a taxicab to get back to the City . . . Or maybe she would consent to stay on board

until morning, holy smoke, we really could have a blast . . . I still could get her a cab in the morning, shave my mug and be bright and ready for a day's work off-shore when my passengers arrived around eight bells. I brought my thoughts back on a more realistic course.

"Tell me, Rita, are you from the City? You don't speak like a New Yorker."

She gazed at me for a moment, then her face lit up in a smile.

"I am from the City, yes, but you guessed correctly, I am a foreigner. I am a refugee from Cuba. I am going to college in the city now."

Well, that would account for not only her accent, but also the correctness of her diction. It betrayed a good educational background. Usually I felt a slight tinge of inferiority when confronted by someone with a better education. I had dropped out of high school to join the Navy, thereby lying about my age, and some of the things which had rubbed off on me in the Navy could not be called culture. Behind the wheel of my boat, I could hold my course against anybody, but on dry land I felt awkward at times. Yet, here I sat with this wonderful Latin import, and the night was full of unspoken promises.

I straightened up and finished my drink, knowing everybody in the room watched me.

"Well, Rita, if you really want to go for a boat ride, we should go

now. The tide is just right. What do you say?" She stared absent-mindedly in her glass, then lifted it to her lips. "To a pleasant voyage, Captain." Her smile was more than promising. It caused my pulse to go faster.

She stuffed the cigarette case in her bag, rose from the stool and bent down to pick up her luggage. I was there first and our cheeks touched. I caught a swift of her perfume. It electrified me. "Let me carry your things."

"Si, but I carry the radio. It cost much money."

I conceded, nodding to Chet: "See you in the morning."

He smirked back at me, his cigar signalling good luck.

I looked around. Blockhead Andersen and the crazy clam diggers stared in disbelief. I gave them my best sneer and we walked out the door.

"Why, did you see that sonovabitch," I heard Andersen sputter, as the screen door banged shut behind us. "Oh brother," commented Chet, "he's got it badly for that chick . . ." Then we were out of earshot and I grinned in the dark. Wait until Big Jim heard of this little episode.

I led the way around the building, to where the catwalk began which led out to the boat slips. The water lay oily blue and mirror-quiet. A big full orange moon was on the rise in the east. Across the channel, in the Ship's Inn, a juke-

box lamented. Jerks, I thought and spat in the water, get yourself all hot and bothered, while I have got myself the real thing. We walked across the creaking planks and reached my boat. I swung over the coaming and plopped in the cockpit. Placing Rita's overnighiter on a thwart, I helped her aboard. She was surprisingly light.

"Make yourself at home," I instructed her, switching on the cabin light.

"I would rather stay up here," she replied and settled herself on the bench. I stepped up to the helm, turned the blower switches and started the engines. The echo of the exhausts rolled around the harbor basin. After I had gunned the engines I let them settle down to a contented growl, handled myself along the catwalk and slipped the mooring lines.

Back at the controls I eased the port engine into reverse and slowly the boat swung out into the channel. The tide was nearly high, and spring tide too, I thought, with plenty of water in the channels. I put both engines in forward, flipped the switches for the running lights and the radios. The boat slid effortlessly through the water. I took a deep breath. Starting out on a run never failed to give me a deep thrill. But tonight would be a very special run, and thinking of delights to come I could feel a familiar sensation in the groin. I turned to Rita. "There

are ice cubes in the ice box under the sink in the galley," I said, "the glasses are in a rack over the sink. In my cabin, up forward, is a locker over the desk, where you'll find a bottle. How about rigging up a drink for us?" Rita nodded, got up from her seat and slipped down the companionway, leaving her white shoes behind. I dialed the AM receiver until I found a station featuring soft music.

Several incoming boats passed me, and presently my boat rounded the last bend in East Rockaway Channel. The buoy in the mouth of the channel winked a friendly light. I swung the bow to port and we were in Reynolds Channel. The new Long Beach bridge came into view through the open span of the railroad bridge. There was heavy traffic on Long Beach bridge in both directions. I thought of the poor slobs in their hot cars, restlessly cruising through the night to find a spot of relief either on the beach or on the road. No, I thought, no life for me on the shore. There is nothing in the world like cruising with your boat on a moonlit night with a beautiful girl. Having your cake and eating it too.

There was current under the bridge and it took my full attention. Once we were past the bridge, in front of the seaplane base, I relaxed. Rita sure did take a long time to fix those drinks, I thought, perhaps she could not find the bot-

tle. I bent down to the companionway. "Having trouble finding the stuff?"

I thought I heard a drawer slam. Then her voice, faint. "I found it." A few minutes later she appeared with the glasses. I accepted the one she handed me, tasted the drink and set the glass down next to the binnacle. The drink was certainly stiff. But then again, why not?

The length of Reynolds Channel lay ahead of us. I eased the twin throttles forward. The engines responded with a powerful roar, the boat gathering headway. I felt great.

"Here," I said to Rita, "take the wheel for a while to see how it feels." She hesitated, but I took her arm and pushed her gently before the heavy mahogany wheel. Timidly she reached for the spokes. It amused me to watch her, the face very serious, looking straight forward, while the soft light of the compass lamp reflected rosily on her cheeks. Somehow she reminded me of a little girl playing very earnestly with her dollhouse. But it must have been a long road from there to the sex bomb who was my guest tonight. I wondered how many turns and curves, how many detours had been in that road.

"Tell me about yourself," I said.

"There is not much to tell," she replied after a while, not taking her eyes away. "My father was a businessman, and when Castro came to power, he and my mother

and my brothers were arrested. I never saw them again. I fled by plane to Miami, and finally came to New York."

"Where do you live in New York?"

"I have a small place in the Seventies, on the East Side."

"But what do you do for a living?"

"I model part-time."

"No man friends?"

"Well," she hesitated, "Yes, I have a few friends who help me along when I am in need of help."

I do not know why I felt a twinge of jealousy, which was entirely uncalled for. After all, a girl going to college and living all alone can't subsist on part-time earnings, she will have to depend on some generous males, and I knew the going rate for such assistance only too well. It was an almost classical story. And small wonder too, with her looks. . . . Only I did not feel inclined to contribute to her war funds with my cash, it would cheapen the whole thing.

"Say, Rita, how did you wind up in that dumpy little bar tonight? It's so far off the beaten path, only the natives know where it is."

"That one," she laughed, "a friend of mine told me about it. I was curious about it, so I took a taxi, and there I was and there were you."

"Simple," I said, "But who is your friend who knew this place?"

"Oh, I think it is Mr. Summers. He is in pictures or something. I met him last week at a party."

I thought that over. It could have been one of my own passengers. Although I knew most of my steadies by name, they sometimes brought friends along.

"What does he look like?"

"Well, he is middle-aged, with the hair thinning out, a little heavy, full round face."

The description of Mr. Summers could have fitted at least half of my clientele. I felt tempted to ask her how well she knew Mr. Summers, but shelved the thought, when Rita spoke up. "Why not tell me about yourself a little?"

I gulped my drink and lit a cigaret. "Not much to tell there either. I was raised in the town here, ran off to the Navy, got into submarine service. When I came home in '48 the old people had died, so I sold the old homestead and bought the boat."

"Submarines," mused Rita, "so you were in submarines. How high in rank did you rise in the Navy?"

"Not very high I am afraid," I chuckled, a little self-conscious, "you see, I had no college training, so I could not become an officer. But I made petty officer and chief radar man," I added somewhat proudly.

Rita nodded: "So you know all about radar, and probably about navigation too, no?"

"Oh yes," I agreed, maybe a little too emphatically. "I know all about navigation, including celestial. But that's something you probably don't understand," I added.

"No, I don't," Rita shook her head.

"Here," I said, "how about getting me a refill? I'll take over from here on, we're almost there." I handed her my glass and took the wheel from her. The stiff drink and the amount of liquor I had had already at Chet's had made me thirsty. Rita went below. Big Hassock, on the charts also named Parsonage Island, was a dark hump off the port bow. I eased the throttles back.

"What do you intend doing?" Rita had stepped up behind me noiselessly, bearing a brimming full glass. The unexpected question threw me off balance for a moment. I took the glass from her and took a long swig. Its contents were even more potent than before. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

"Well, it's like this," I replied at length, "I have people coming aboard in the morning, and I don't want to go out too far now. Tide is turning soon. Thought we'd anchor here for a while and enjoy the moon." I grinned feebly. I could feel her gaze on me, and gave her a quick glance while I worked the wheel. Females have sometimes a sphinx-like quality about them

when faced with their Moment of Truth, a certain variety that is, which at times signals trouble for the man who hates to see his best-laid plans go up in smoke. I was no exception.

"But I thought you would give me a nice long ride," she pouted. The pout was very becoming, but at the same time left me feeling silly, like a little boy caught with his hands in the cooky jar.

"Thought so too," I mumbled evasively. "But this here is a good spot, no traffic and no current behind the Hassock."

"Oh please no," she begged. "I wanted so much to go on the ocean tonight. Please let's ride out to the ocean, yes?"

"But honey," I injected, at the same time feeling my resistance crumble, "we'll have the tide against us on the way back, and Jones Inlet is a bad place in a rip tide, especially at night." Her reply disarmed me: "So you are afraid of the tide, no? The great big Yankee captain, the Navy hero of the submarines, my Christoforo Columbus, is afraid of a little tide? Ha ha ha . . ." With uncanny accuracy she had found the weak spot in my pride, and shot her arrow. I could feel it quiver in the tender spot. Angrily I picked up my glass and downed the drink, flung my cigarette over the side. "Okey," I said, turning to her. "We'll go out on the ocean. Let it never be said I am a sissy."

"That is better," she said tenderly, rising on her toes and putting her arms around me. She kissed me on the lips and her hands searched and climbed all over me like hungry kittens. I felt the desire explode in my groin and run through me like fire. Roughly I pulled her close and kissed her hard.

When I let her go she took a deep breath, a surprised look on her face. "Oh you Yanks," she whispered softly, "you know how to make love, don't you."

"Well, some of us do," I said modestly, while pride swelled my chest. Then I remembered the wheel and turned around. The boat was heading straight for the island. I spun the wheel and put the engines in reverse. We had almost fetched up on the black, marshy land. "See what you do to me," I scolded her in mock anger. Her giggle was disarming. "Oh you great big Yankee captain, did I put you off course, no?"

"You sure seem to, honey," I replied, grinning. I put the engines in neutral, and we looked at each other for a moment.

"Can I make a suggestion?" she queried.

"Shoot."

"We go out on the ocean and you let the boat drift, and we will look at the moon and I will give you kisses, yes?"

I digested this. My digestion had always been excellent, but her

hands stroking my cheeks speeded up the digesting process considerably. It made her idea outright desirable. I could always top off the gas tanks in the morning.

My hands were already busy with the controls while my thoughts went ahead. The engines jumped to life and made the stern of the boat dig in like a leaping panther. I set course for the Inlet. Tossing off my drink, I handed Rita the glass for a refill.

Rita took the glass and disappeared below. She did not reappear until we were past Point Lookout bridge, and then she carried a fresh drink for me. I took a quick gulp and then we hit the inlet current and I had my hands full with the wheel I made the inlet alright, and once we were clear of the outer bar the ocean swells lifted the boat gently. The water was calm, there was no wind, and the full moon threw a silvery path ahead of the boat. I inhaled deeply and lit a cigarette. The white line of the beach fell back, the small houses of Point Lookout turned into tiny indistinguishable cubes. I turned to Rita. She stood next to me, one of those inscrutable expressions on her face. I pulled the throttles back. "I think this is a good spot right here. How about it?" Rita reached behind my neck and pulled my face down to her lips. "I go below and change, yes, and you drive the boat a little, more, yes?"

"Okay," I laughed, "I will 'drive' the boat a little further, but then I will join you below, and I want to collect my kisses."

She nodded eagerly and turned away. I downed my drink in two big gulps. What a dame, what a hot dish, holy cow . . . I turned the wheel to head the boat into the outgoing tide. If I headed her back to shore a little way, I could drop the anchor. The tide would keep the boat headed to the shore. I threw my cigarette away, shifted the engines into neutral and reached for the ignition keys.

"Don't touch the keys," a voice warned me. I spun around. Rita stood behind me, the ugly snout of a .38 a mere foot from my stomach. Her face was void of any expression, her eyes dark bottomless pools. I froze.

We stared at each other for what I thought a pint-sized eternity. Finally my tongue returned to life.

"What's the matter, Rita, what kind of a joke is this?"

"It is no joke, Yankee," she spat. Her voice, before so soft and purring, lashed me like a whip. I could feel fear running down my spine. This girl must be crazy, I thought. And crazy people you must treat like a dynamite charge, on which the fuse had failed to go off, I told myself.

The seconds ticked by. I could feel them pound in my head. "Look, Rita," I finally managed to

stutter, "let's cut out the horseplay. I didn't want to do you any harm. If you don't feel like a little romance, we'll head back to the dock and forget the whole thing, huh?"

The red gash in Rita's face moved. "Romance, ha! Romance. That is a big joke. I do not care about romance, Yankee. It means nothing to me. Many other men have already made love to my body, and it meant nothing to me. We want the boat, Yankee, and the instruments, and you are going to give it to us, and you will show us how to use them. They will be here in a little while."

My head spun. I wished I had not had so much liquor, it took such a long time until her words penetrated my alcoholic brain.

"They," she had said. "We," she had said.

"Who are they, Rita," I asked gently, but my voice rasped.

"You need not know, Yankee, although it does not matter. You will die when we have gotten your knowledge out of you. But you will live for a few more days, if you obey us. Now go on course South East by South magnetic. I presume you have your deviation table handy. I do not want them to miss us." I was paralyzed. This girl, who had pretended she had never been on a boat knew her way around navigation pretty well. She even knew that on a small boat such as mine the metal of the en-

gines would influence the compass needle at various courses, and that such was called 'deviation.' Yes, I had my deviation table ready, next to the compass. In a daze I turned to the compass and switched on the little chart light. In its shine I read off the course to take. I made a mental calculation and reached for the throttles. The cold steel of the gun barrel poked in the small of my back. I reacted instantly, spun the wheel around and shoved the throttles forward, laying on the course. The boat settled down to a steady run. The gun barrel moved away. It took me some time to get up enough courage to peer over my shoulder. What I saw made me gasp for breath.

Rita sat on the cockpit bench, the delivery end of her .38 pointed at me. With her left hand she had opened the front of the portable. A thin telescope aerial sprouted from the top of the set, glinting mockingly in the moonlight. A black steel bow holding a solitary ear-phone, the type switchboard operators use, straddled tightly Rita's blue-black hair. She held a small white microphone with a white cord, into which she spoke rapidly in Spanish. I could not understand her words, but the whole scene began to make sense. She spoke to whoever the "we's" were. Rita eyed me coldly while she finished her conversation. I felt like a big fly in the net, with the spider look-

ing on casually, honing up for the kill. I turned back to my compass. The boat had gone off course a quarter of a point. I corrected the course. No use fooling with this chick, I thought.

I heard the snap of a lock behind me. The telescope aerial had disappeared. The portable rested innocently on the bench. Rita held the gun pointed at me unwaveringly. A cigarette dangled from the corner of her mouth.

"Look, Rita," I finally managed to say, "let's talk this thing over reasonably. If you want the boat, you can have it. Just let me jump off somewhere near the shore. I can swim home."

"Shut up, Yankee."

"Rita, this is piracy," I implored, although I did not give a hoot about the finer legal points of maritime law right then. "They'll grab you before you get to Sandy Hook. They'll hang you from the yard-arm."

"Save your dramatics, Yankee." I knew it was hopeless, and turned back to the wheel, giving the receding shore line a longing look. After some time I checked my course again, and when I looked up, I saw it first.

I let out a low whistle. So that was how they were going to pull it off. It was only a black speck in the moon's path, but there was no mistake about it. It grew rapidly bigger, taking shape. I had seen a good many of them, ours, the ones

the Japs had, even a captured German one. But I had never seen one like the one closing in on me dead ahead. It was not an atomic job, of that I was certain. I had seen photos of the ones the Russians had. It was a small submarine. A small, conventional fleet sub. I racked my brain thinking of what nation built the blasted things, but I could not find the answer. Most any self-respecting Navy in most any country today had subs, what with all the war surplus junk that had been traded after the war, legally or otherwise. It was no use, I was in the trap.

Presently the sub slowed down. My orders were given rapidly. "Slow your engines. Go alongside of the submarine on its port side, under the conning tower. When you are alongside, shift into neutral. Do not stop your engines. The boarding party will take over from there."

I nodded dumbly. My hands did the right things mechanically. Now there is a competent female for you, I thought dully. Would make a crack skipper, gun and all. Would never have to worry about a mutiny. Some chick . . .

The boat eased up to the side of the submarine. I spotted three bearded characters leaning over the edge of the conning tower. They wore khaki shirts open at the neck. A hatch flew open on the foredeck, and what emerged was a rabble of unshaved guys to be found only in

an old Errol Flynn Pirate Special. Only this gang carried modern submachine guns, and I didn't doubt for a moment they had live ammo in their magazines. The gang swarmed over the deck like a bunch of cats, and in no time my bow and stern lines were held secure. Four or five took up station not very far from my head. To squint into that many gun barrels can be an unnerving experience.

Next, three youngish men appeared on deck. They wore neatly pressed khaki and long-billed boating caps. They carried canvas bags and slithered into my boat like acrobats. Behind them came a huge bearded guy, a monstrous .45 strapped to his waist. He too dropped in. Rita and he went through a big act of hugging and kissing. So, that's it, I thought and spat against the side of the sub.

When they were finished with the ceremonies, the Big One turned to me. His English was correct to a fault, but his Latin accent was as thick as the soles of his deck shoes. "How much gasoline do you have in the tanks, Yank?"

"Near full," I replied.

"What is near full, idiot?"

"180 gallons," I said, "we were running for more than an hour. The engines burn up about 15 gallons per hour. Figure it out for yourself."

"Cute bastard, aren't you," he growled and kicked me hard in the belly. I gasped for air and crumpled on the floor. I don't

know if and how long I had been passed out, but when I could think again, my new crew was on the rear deck of my boat, helping Rita up to the deck of the sub. An idea popped up in my head like a gas bubble pops to the surface after a long travel from the muddy bottom of a river. I wriggled around carefully. Next to the steering wheel I had installed a big tetrachloride fire extinguisher. It wasn't exactly what the Coast Guard approved, for that purpose I had two dry-chemical extinguishers. It just happened that I liked the big tetrachloride job because of its polished chrome tank and the reassuring look of its red rubber hose. My passengers always had felt the same way about it. It was a show piece, advertising "Safety".

Lying in the dark, I carefully opened the clamp holding the fire extinguisher in its bracket. When I had it loose, I took a deep breath and upended the thing. I heard the glass bulb inside burst and jumped up. In a flash I had the hose aimed at my guards, and a hissing jet of liquid shot out. I knew how tetrachloride burns in the eyes, and that's what I guided the jet at. The effect was startling, even to me. Submachine guns clattered to the deck and slid down the curved side of the sub and into the water. The swaggering gang turned into a howling mob, arms before their faces, trying to shield off the burning flow. Quickly I turned to the

bunch on the rear deck. The reaction caused by my tetrachloride was similar. The next instant I dropped the fire extinguisher, slapped the throttles forward and gripped the wheel. For a heart-stopping moment there was no response. The thought that I had killed the engines flashed through my mind. Dear God, I prayed, please give me this one chance, please just this once. But my fears were unfounded. The hydraulic Morse controls cushioned the clashing of the gears shifted against the engines turned up to top revolutions. The boat leaped forward. The motion was so sudden, it threw me off my feet. I felt the boat scraping along the barnacled hull of the sub for an agonizing rend, ended by a piercing scream. Struggling to my knees I lunged for the wheel, spinning it to starboard. The port quarter of the boat bumped against the sub once more, then it was clear. I got up on my feet and poked my head through the side window. Heads bobbed in my wake along the sub. I pulled away from the sub in a wide circle. A quick glance at the cockpit convinced me that my crew had gone over the stern when the boat took off.

A sensation of joy surged through me: the Man upstairs had heard my prayer. I stepped back from the wheel and lit a cigarette with shaking hands.

For a second my eyes were

blinded by the flame of the match, and that was the second I missed. When the dark shape lunged at me, I was unprepared. He must have been hiding behind the cockpit bench, and now his .45 spoke, leaving me deaf.

The full weight of his body knocked me down. We both rolled on the wet deck. I grabbed the now-empty fire extinguisher and heaved it at him. He dodged it, the fire extinguisher crashed into the two-way transmitter. His .45 spat an ugly flame again. I felt the sting of the bullet whizzing past my temple. Cold fury seized me. I made a flying tackle, but he side-stepped me neatly and I crashed head-on in the instrument panel. His .45 barked again. I felt the engines quit under my feet. I struggled up again, hoping he would keep up being a lousy shot. Panting I leaned with my back against the cabin bulkhead. Under one hand I felt a door knob. Without realizing why, I pulled the knob. The small door of the emergency flare cabinet opened under my hand. Instinctively I reached inside, felt the handle of the flare gun. With a shaking hand I pulled it out. He saw it and pulled the trigger of his .45. The bullet smashed the windshield to splinters. Before I could lift the Very gun, he was all over me, with the butt of his .45 battering my head. I managed to press the Very gun against his abdomen and pulled the trigger. The

blinding flash and the explosion were one, and then his blood and bits of his intestines were in my face. He collapsed over me like a wet sack. I wriggled out from under his dead weight, wiping the blood off my eyes. When I could see again, I made a wild dash for him: his clothing was on fire, and he lay over the port engine hatch. I grabbed the limp body, dragged him to the side and hoisted him overboard. The water hissed, closing over his torn body. He went down immediately. I took a deep breath of air and then I puked over the side with boundless enthusiasm.

I must have lain on the deck for a while before I heard the shouts. The shouts came from the submarine. Pulling myself over the coaming, I saw figures running on the deck of the sub. They dragged a heavy metallic object and set it up on a stand. I recognized it. It was a heavy machine gun. It did not take me very long to deduce what the target would be. Especially a target as big as the Medusa, sitting like a duck, with the engines dead. Christ, they could get me with a minnow net. The thought electrified me.

Hastily I checked the controls. The ignition keys were still in the "on" position. No dice here. I glanced at the sub. A plume of exhaust fumes rose from the sub's deck grating. Her Diesels rumbled. The sub gathered headway, de-

scribing a graceful arc toward the Medusa. I began to shake uncontrollably. Here I was, my boat rolling gently in the long swells of the Atlantic, the engines dead and a sub full of trigger-happy bastards bearing down on me, with a heavy machine gun ready for business. The Fire Island light winked cold and impersonal on the horizon.

Swearing loudly I pulled myself together. I slid down the companionway. I knew my boat's instrument panel had an access door which opened inside the head. With fumbling hands I flipped the light on in the head. Here was the access door. I pulled the small door knob. The door was stuck, I had not opened it for some time. Furi-ously I pulled again. Finally the door opened. Frayed wire ends started in my face. A stray bullet from my friend's .45 had parted the main wire to the panel. A one-in-a-million-shot, I said loudly, a goddamned one-in-a-million-shot. When I twisted the wire ends together, a small blue spark erupted and I got a shock. I ducked back up to the helm, hit the starters. The engine growled and burst into life. I gave the throttles a whack and the boat leaped forward once more. This time I was ready for it and hung on to the wheel. Then I spun the wheel hard over.

That was the signal for all hell to break loose. I dropped to the deck. The bullets from the machine gun ripped through the Me-

dusa with neat precision. I swore angrily and turned the wheel, while laying on my side, until I felt the boat swing around. When the Medusa's stern turned to the sub, the firing ceased. Carefully I raised my head over the coaming. The sub was left astern. I stood up and lit myself a cigarette. The shaking of my hands reminded me of the bottle I had below. Leaving the wheel to its own devices, I went below and brought back the bottle. Giving the sub one glance, I lifted the bottle and drank deeply. I didn't stop until it was empty. Carelessly I flung it in the cockpit. It burst against the deck flooring.

My hands steadied, the tremor in my body subsided. I lit another smoke and took stock of the situation. The radio was smashed, I could not call for assistance. The instruments were useless, with half of the glass fronts buried in my scalp. The running lights were out. I could barely make out the shore line. Also, the tide had set me off quite a bit. Laying on a course for the light buoy at the inlet, I folded down the helmsman's seat and sat on it wearily. I knew I had to get back to the shore and call the Coast Guard. It would take me at least half an hour to get through the inlet and to Point Lookout dock. There was a pay phone outside a fishing shack. By the time the Coast Guard could get a boat out here, the submarine would have vanished. Still, maybe they

could get the Navy into the act, with their modern underwater detection devises they should be able to get that damn sub and blow it to bits. 'Those goddamn brazen Communist bastards, I thought, those rotten stinkin' mother lovin' punks.

The liquor I had poured down my throat, together with the steady roar of my engines made me drowsy. Perhaps I fell asleep for a few minutes. The changed sound of the engines woke me up. They sounded louder, straining harder. In a flash I was wide awake. The boat had a slight list to port. I slipped off the seat and went below. My feet splashed in water, it was more than ankle deep. The shock of the realization run through me ice-cold. The machine gun bullets had punctured the hull, my boat was taking water. And a waterlogged hull was bound to lose speed. I leapt back in the cockpit. My blood froze. The sub had gained on me again. I could see her conning tower clearly, the men in it outlined against the moonlit sky.

Cold raw fear gripped me, paralyzed me, made my knees wobble. No, I gasped, no, I don't want to die like a rat, not yet. Do something, I told myself, don't stand there like a statue, get your ass in gear, Mac, get a move on.

I got a grip on myself and did the necessary things mechanically: switch on the bilge pumps, open the drain cock on the fresh water tank, got the life jackets out. Rou-

tinely I glanced over the side. A nice steady stream of bilge water spurted from the bilge pump scupper. A faint glimmer of hope rose in me: if the holes were not too numerous, and if the bilge pumps held out, and if the engines didn't drown on me, I might make it yet to the inlet. If if, too many if's . . . Looking back at the sub, I realized that she had gained still more on me. The machine gun crew clustered around the gun pedestal again, getting ready for the final showdown. Maybe they would not even have to shoot me, they could ram me just as easily.

The minutes dragged by, while I thought back of the past two hours. It had started out grandly, with a gorgeous doll, moonlight and a hot feeling in my groin. But the doll had turned out to be a rattle-snake, the moonlight set me up as an easy target, and the nice feeling in my groin had long given way to a monstrous headache. I still could not figure all the angles.

While I thought this over, I got very angry. First at myself, that I had fallen for such a stupid trick. After all, hadn't there been a Trojan Horse once before? Shouldn't I have known better?

Then I got angry again at the rabble back there in the sub. What were they, Cubans? Free-booters? Pirates? Part of the sea might of some South American banana country? But why would they pick on me, and not on the Queen

Mary? I had no money on me, and the boat was worth peanuts in comparison to their sub. And then the idea struck me. Hot stuff, I thought, why hadn't I thought of it before? I slapped my forehead and winced. The glass splinters were still there.

The little door to the flare cabinet still stood ajar. I reached inside and pulled the flare rockets out. Lashing the wheel tight, I took four of the flares and stuck their stems in the fishing pole sockets along the coaming. With cupped hands I lit each fuse cord and stepped back. The fuse cords, impregnated with wax, sputtered while the flames crawled hungrily into the flares. There were four muffled explosions and the rockets streaked hissing in the sky. Each flare had a tiny parachute attached to it, on which they now dangled. The surface of the sea reflected the red glow of the flares. They had been expensive, those flares, but I did not mind the price at all right now. I knew they would be visible for miles around.

Having enjoyed my fireworks for a few moments, I looked back at the sub. I could not believe my eyes: she had turned to starboard and was heading out to the sea. It was high time, because just then the water in the bilge had won over the engines; they stuttered for a few more revolutions and quit. Only the bilge pumps kept whining.

I went below, where the water was now knee high. Feeling my way up forward, I fetched my binoculars and returned to the cockpit. I scanned the sea for the sub, but I saw only her conning tower above the water, throwing a foamy wake. Within a few seconds she had dived below the surface. If they knew how shoaly the water was here—and they must have known—they must have sweated out the next two hours, groping their way into deeper water.

Stiffly I sat down on the cockpit bench. I was bone-tired. The last thing I saw was a white flare climbing in the sky over Short Beach Coast Guard Station.

When I came to, I was in the prison ward of Meadowbrook Hospital.

Stubbing out my cigarette in the ash tray in front of me, where there was already a pile of butts, I looked first at the Federal agents and then at the warden.

The warden sat in his chair, his face inscrutable.

"Why the prison ward?" asked one of the agents.

"Search me," I said resignedly, "nobody wanted to believe my story. Everybody told me I had gone off in my boat that evening with a stunningly beautiful woman, half drunk. Next thing they found me floundering offshore with a sinking boat, a lot of blood all over the boat and myself.

Minus one woman. They even told me I had shot the boat full of holes myself, to make it look real. They accused me of having tried to rape that woman, and when she put up resistance, to have killed her and thrown her in the water. They found a .45 in the boat, with only one slug left in the chamber, the woman's shoes, a broken whiskey bottle and some odds and ends of clothing. I guess they even think I smashed a thousand dollars worth of radio equipment too, to make it look genuine," I added bitterly.

The Federal man shot a glance at the warden. "When is he going to be tried?"

The warden shrugged. "As soon as the women's body is found."

"How long will that take?"

The warden shrugged again. "Hard to say, but they always drift to the shore, every one of 'em. The boys find them months after they disappear. It's a strange thing, how they always wash up on the beach . . ."

I muled over the warden's words on my way back to our tier. Smiley nudged me in the elevator: "How did it go, kid?" "Wish I knew, Smiley," I said and I was very tired.

Keys rattled, a steel door clanged shut. I was in my cell.

Three weeks later I was released, without any trial or any further interrogations. They gave me some old clothes, since mine were still in the police lab. The

pants were too short, the shirt pinched me under the arms. It was another man's shirt. I wondered if he had died in prison. It was a queer thought, but prison does queer things to a man. The nights are extra long in prison, and thoughts of Sing Sing and the death house attack 'you on silent wings like vampires. My feet stuck in old army boots. They too pinched.

I had hoped the warden would kiss me good bye, but he was nowhere in evidence. When I stepped through the big door, the sunlight blinded me for a moment. I walked down to Hempstead Turnpike and turned left for the bus stop. A well dressed gent rose from the bench at the bus stop.

"Mr. Peddersen?"

I looked him up and down and nodded, a new nameless fear constricting my throat. Prison does strange things to a man. "I am from the New York Daily Press. Name's Frank Lotti. I want to talk to you. My car's over there."

His chin indicated a Pontiac parked across the street. We waited for a lull in the noon hour rush traffic and made a dash for the other side.

"I heard your story on the grapevine," said Lotti, once we were seated in his car. "I understand nobody wanted to buy it. But I want it. My paper, that is. Let's go for dinner first, and then you can fill me in on the details."

"Splendid," I said, "maybe someone will help me to prove my innocence. It's about time someone did. Perhaps the Constitution is still a little more than an old piece of print." I could not help it, the bitterness in me had welled up too strong. Lotti patted my knee. "Chin up, old boy."

The doorman at the Sky Club on Roosevelt Field gave me a dirty look. I could imagine why. A few minutes later we were settled for dinner. Lotti didn't say a word during the entire time it took me to decimate a big steak very methodically. But then, it did not take that long. After the waiter had brought coffee and brandy, I screwed a foot-long cigar in my mouth. It was the biggest one they had in the house. Lotti picked his teeth absentmindedly. Finally he flipped the tooth pick in the ash tray and brought out his notebook.

"What is it you want to know, Mr. Lotti?"

Lotti levelled his gaze at me. "I know what happened to you, in a rough outline. Of course it doesn't make sense. Guess you know that yourself. What's your conclusion?"

I looked at him squarely, puffing up a big smokescreen.

"No conclusion, Mr. Lotti, except that I have been taken for a ride, as a Grade A twenty-four carat sucker."

Lotti shook his head energetically. "Look, Peddersen, let's quit the bull. I want you to level with

me. I know just about as much as there is to know about you. I mean your background. Your service in the submarines. Your honorable discharge. The scrapes you had with the law. Public intoxication, disorderly conduct, small stuff like that. The way you spout off when you have a few too many, about human rights and all that crap. I know it's a farce, the human rights business, I grant you that, the way your civil rights were trampled on just like the civil rights of hundred thousands of Negroes in this country are trampled on. But some people say you are a Commie."

"A what?" I said, feeling my hackles getting up, "a Commie? Is that your opinion too, Lotti?"

"Why not," grinned Lotti, "and what's more, it suits me fine. You know my paper. With them, your story will sit even better." Either Lotti was a very shrewd apple, or extremely dumb. In any case I thought I had heard enough. I had everything taken from me in jail, except my pride. Perhaps I had always had too much pride, the wrong kind and at the wrong time. Who knows. But this time I felt the time and the pride were right. I did need help, all the help I could get, but I never wanted it to come from the wrong people. Especially not from a left wing revolver sheet. I rose from my chair.

"Alright, Lotti, I thank you for the dinner. You can write that off on your expense account. Give my

best regards to your editor-in-chief and tell him I might be anything he thinks I am, but I am not a Communist, and I have never been one, and I have no intentions of becoming one in my old age. Good day, Sir."

Lotti remained seated, grinning at me crookedly, while I stalked off angrily. I rode the elevator down. The doorman gave me a dirty look again. I flung the cigar butt at his feet.

Ten minutes later I found myself planted at the corner of Old County Road and Washington Avenue in Garden City, trying to thumb a ride to Hempstead. I had just dimly begun to perceive that I might not have any luck on account of my attire, when I saw Lotti's Pontiac. He pulled up alongside and opened the door. "Hop in, I might as well give you a lift home."

I climbed on the seat. Lotti drove in silence all the way down to the Porthole. He seemed to know the way. When the car came to a stop I got out and thanked him. Then I stepped into the tap room. Chet was perched behind the bar, his usual fat cigar tilted in his mouth at a jaunty angle. The angle of the cigar indicated good weather. "Hiya boy, here comes Willie marching home. How's tricks?" "Make mine a double," I said in response and mounted a bar stool. Chet poured me a stiff one and I bolted it down. "Good

stuff," I said and smacked my lips. Chet filled the glass again. "On the house, Popeye."

"Thanks, pal, here's to mud in your baby-blues."

I downed the second drink. The warming liquid slowly spread through my body and took some of the ache out of the bones. "Say, Chet, you got a spare cot in your wigwam for me, 'til I get myself a room in town?"

Chet's eyebrows arched up. "What's wrong with living on the boat? Think you'll have nightmares sacking out in your old bunk? Never knew you to be superstitious."

I looked at him dumbfounded. "What boat you talking about? Last I heard the Medusa was sunk at the Coast Guard pier at Short Beach. Or do you want me to flake out on somebody else's boat?"

Chet seemed to enjoy himself hugely. The cigar pointed to the ceiling. His grin was disgustingly smug. Finally he took the cigar out of his mouth and pointed at the window. "Ever try your twenty-twenty vision?"

Following the direction his cigar pointed, I looked at the window. The boat I saw directly in front of the window occupied my old slip. It was a beautiful new boat, gleaming in white and varnish. Yet there was something familiar about it, something about the lines I knew I had seen once before. My God, it shot through me, can it be?

The next moment I made tracks around the building, tearing down the catwalk, the boards moaning in protest. When I came to the end of the catwalk I stopped cold: it was my boat, the Medusa. She lay in her slip, riding high and proud and, I could not help feeling that way, arrogant like a swan. There was no trace of bullet holes, no broken glass, no signs of submersion. She shone with the newness of her white paint and the deep healthy glow of varnished mahogany and the polished brass of her bell and her ports. She even had a new flag staff on her bow, a shiny chrome affair. Idiots, I reflected, who ever puts a flag staff on a bow? Cautiously I limbered up and stole aboard. The radio equipment had been replaced with new instruments of the same make. The control panel gleamed. I went below. The cabin was dry and fairly reeked of putty and varnish. The mattress on my bunk was new. I opened a clothes closet: my only Sunday suit hung in it, neatly pressed. Drawers contained my shirts, freshly washed. The galley was stocked with canned goods, the tins in a protective wax coat. I opened the spigot on the sink. Fresh water ran out.

Returning to the cockpit, I opened the engine hatches. The engines sparkled with a new coat of red enamel. I had no doubt they would turn over at a touch of the starter switches. I closed the

engine hatches again. For a while I sat in the cockpit, stupefied. Who had played Santa Claus for me? Then it struck me: Lotti. And I didn't know if I should be angry or glad. Too much had happened so far in one day. I would have to have some sack time over this. I jumped on the catwalk and went back to the shore. When I turned a corner I caught a glimpse of Lotti's Pontiac disappearing around a bend in the road.

I went inside the bar. Chet was polishing glasses. Once more I straddled a bar stool.

"Chet, who rigged the Medusa out for me?"

Chet stopped polishing: "You asking me?"

"Yes, I'm asking you."

"Hell, I dunno. Some guys brought her around a couple of days ago. Said you had ordered her refit. Must have been a nice accommodating jail you were in, that they let you conduct your business deals from there."

"The hell they did, let me tell you."

"Well, she's fixed, so what do you worry about?"

"She's fixed, yes, but somebody footed the bill, yet I don't think it was on account of somebody's social conscience acting up. There is a price tag on everything in life, and I wonder what the price tag says."

"You'll find out in due time. Here, have another one." Chet gave

me one of his foxy grins and filled my glass. We were the **only** people in the room. The reflections of the sunlight on the water dimpled the ceiling over the bar. It *was* nice to be home again.

Some time later Chet put his cigar down. "Guess you need dough. Mind the store for a minute, I'm going over to the house and get you some loot. How much do you need? Fifty okay?" I nodded. Chet left through the back door. He lived in a glorified shack next door, where he kept all cash in a heavy old safe. I helped myself to another drink and stepped up to the window. The willows across the channel had turned yellow. Fall was here. I would have to think of getting ready for my annual trip south pretty soon. I imagined business was shot for me here anyhow. I had been out of circulation too long. People don't wait around for their favorite skipper to get out of jail, if they wait at all. It was logical. The more I thought about it, the more I felt like taking off next morning. Might as well have myself a holiday, a leisurely trip all alone. No passengers this time. Getting into Pompano or Vero Beach bright and early. Or maybe try the Florida west coast for a change. Or the Islands. When Chet returned, my mind was made up.

During the afternoon I stocked up on ice and liquor, topped off the tanks and inspected the batter-

ies. I took the boat down to Reynolds Channel, gave her a shake-down cruise, tested the radios. Everything worked just fine. In the evening I washed up, put a fresh uniform on and dropped in on Chet. I had him open his safe once more, to take out five-hundred dollars of my savings. Later on the gang piled in: Eric Finn, Red Kirsten, blockhead Andersen, Big Jim O'Neill. The word had gotten around fast. We had a great big hello, and I had to drink with everyone. A bunch of young kids tortured the juke box, the girls dancing in their stocking feet. It was quite a party, and it was very late when I turned in. My head ached and droned. I wriggled into the sleeping bag and lay back. The boat swayed gently and the honking of the saxophones in the Ship's Inn were my lullabye.

As a sailor, a fellow builds up a sixth sense. Mine was well-oiled. It woke me up. I held my wrist-watch close to the eyes. The time was 02:15. The boat swayed sideways, but the familiar noises were missing. No moaning of the catwalk timbers, no chafing of the fenders against the hull. I popped out of the sleeping bag, stared through the port over my bunk. I saw only the dim outline of some marshy edge of some channel. My head buzzed. I rubbed my eyes, but it was no dream, no nightmare. Or it was a nightmare after all: the edge of the channel moved

slowly past. My God, I thought, the boat has come loose, I am drifting with the tide. But how was it possible? I had secured the mooring lines as I always did, and my boat had never come loose, never.

Hastily I slipped my pants on, pulled a sweater over my head. On bare feet I padded through the dining galley, crept up the companion-way to the deck. I flung the door open and stared in the muzzle of a fat, snub-nosed revolver. It took me some time until I could discern the outline of the man behind the gun. He was of slender build, wore a dark suit and a fedora. The snub-nosed revolver begged me up on the deck. In the corner of my eye I saw another dark shape. It held the twin brother of the snub-nosed revolver close to my head. Its bearer wore a light top coat and a narrow-brimmed hat.

"Mr. Peddersen?" The voice was only a soft whisper.

"Yes, that's me. What the devil you want?"

"Start the engines, mister, and avoid any unnecessary noise. We go out through Jones Inlet. You know the way."

Instantly the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle fell into place. I sure knew the way alright. I had come full circle. I felt for the ignition switches. The engines turned over faultlessly. When I gunned the port engine too hard, Snub-Nose poked me in the ribs. The language was universal. I obeyed and throttled back. Looking

around I could make out the winking light of East Rockaway Channel. The boat had drifted quite a long time before I had awakened. I eased the engines into gear. A try to switch on the running lights earned me another poke with the revolver. The spot in my side had become very sensitive.

Morosely I steered into Reynolds Channel. The overcast was of a hostile slate grey. The wind blew briskly from the south. There would be heavy swells in the Atlantic. I wondered how well my two shadows were prepared for that. I had seen strong men heave their guts out in those swells. The boat would take it and so would I. I chuckled mirthlessly.

The tide was going out fully when we hit Jones Inlet. The outer bar was breaking ugly with long manes of white foam. I slipped on the fathom meter. It told me that I was still in sufficiently deep water. As if I didn't know . . .

Jones Inlet was an eddying seething mass of unruly waters, cross and angry with an unforgiving choppiness. It buffeted the Medusa about unmerciful. I had no time to pay attention to my fellow travelers, it took all my know-how to force the boat to the mouth of the inlet. There the breakers lay across my way solidly. I had to go through them. Grimly determined I spun the wheel around, heading dead-on into the foaming breakers. The boat balked and shuttered and

then the boiling, swirling water was all around us. The wheel kicked in my hands, hissing spray shot past the wheelhouse and splashed the windshield. A flick of the switch brought the windshield wipers to life. Their steady buzz and the regular measured sweep of the wiper blades was reassuring. A big angry breaker lifted the Medusa, her bow rose in the sky, the crest of the wave rumbled past, churning tons of gravel along, the bow dropped until the bottom of the boat thudded with a sickening jar on the ground below and then we were over the bar. I thought with a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach of my propellers and the rudder, but the wheel responded freely and the engine revolutions did not change. I ventured to turn around. My two passengers gathered themselves off the deck, guns still pointed at me.

We were clear of the banks when I eased the wheel over to port. Fire Island light became a brilliant star dead ahead. My little manoeuvre brought quick reaction from my guests. "The course is south-east by south, mister."

They too had learned their lessons in navigation. Mechanically I spun the wheel over. I did not have to look back to know what my companions were doing, the pattern was familiar. I heard the click of a lock. When I finally looked over my shoulder it was all there: the figure hunched on the cockpit bench, the portable with the dum-

my front open, the pencil-thin telescope aerial, the white microphone, the steel bow of the head set.

Yet it was not entirely routine this time. I sensed it from the staccato conversation between the two, held in bad, rattling Spanish. Something had gone wring. They jabbered excitedly. After a few more tries they changed places. Tan Topcoat now manipulated the radio set. Fedora glanced over my shoulder. "Just keep your course, mister."

"You bet," I fairly shouted back, and I meant it. This time I would get to the bottom of the whole sordid business. I checked my course and kept my ears trimmed back. Tan Topcoat grew increasingly frustrated. Finally he abandoned his attempts at transmitting. The set was snapped shut. I grinned in the dark, wondering what would come next. For a long time nothing happened. My two abductors stood in stony silence behind me, balancing themselves with the roll and pitch of the boat. They were no landlubbers. We had run almost an hour when one of the two stirred.

"You have binoculars, mister?"

"Yes, they are below. Shelf over my desk."

"I will get them, you stay here."

He disappeared down the companionway. I heard him bang around, but he found the glasses and brought them back on deck. They took turns scanning the dark horizon. Fedora finally found it. They babbled excitedly.

It was an Aldin's lamp, the Morse code lamp used by navies all over the world. Sometimes it dipped behind the long swells, then rose again to the crest of a wave. After all, the conning tower of a small sub does not rise very high above the water surface.

Meeting an old acquaintance at sea can be a heartening experience. Sailors down the centuries looked forward to such occasions, with very few exceptions. Tonight was the exception. I felt very strong about that.

I tried to read the signals, but gave up soon. Of course they would not use clear text, and I had no way of knowing their code.

"You have a Morse lamp, mister?"

I had expected that to come. It tied in nicely with a thought tucked away in the dark recesses of my brain.

"Top shelf in the paint locker, up forward," I said over my shoulder. Fedora, who had made the trip for the binoculars, volunteered to get the signal lamp. I heard him rummage below, slamming door and drawers. Finally a muffled call: "You come down and find it, mister."

With a nasty grin I handed Tan Topcoat the wheel. "Just keep on course, buster, until Dad gets back." He gave me a flinty look and took the wheel.

When I got below, Fedora stood in the narrow passageway to the

foc'sle. The light was on in my cabin. It shone full on him. He had a narrow bony face and a thin mustache under a narrow nose, the skin wrinkled like an old chamois. He looked exactly like the villain in a cartoon strip. I had not believed that they made them that way in reality. But he was real, and he was very angry.

"You fooled me, mister, there is no lamp on the top shelf."

"Sure there is a lamp," I replied cordially, "it probably slid back all the way on the shelf. Let me take a look." I smiled my best Sunday morning smile. He eyed me distrustfully for a second, like a rat in doubt. Then he jerked his head toward the foc'sle. To let me pass, he pressed himself with his back against the clothes locker, lifting his gun over his head to make room. I inched along sideways. When we were face to face I stopped.

"Move on," he snarled. His snarl smelled of garlic, and I had never liked garlic and I liked it less now. I pushed my chin out and took a deep breath. When I brought up my knee in a vicious kick, I put everything into it, all my pent-up fury, the frustration of the long weeks I had spent in jail innocently, the fears and the worries and the near-insanity of the feverish hot nights I had twisted on my sweat-soaked mattress there, the smells of urine and brutality I could not get out of my nostrils, the looming shadow of

the death house which had tortured me, the vampires . . .

The target was soft. Testicles are just about every man's most sensitive component, and he was, in that respect, no exception. The initial pain, and a shocked disbelief, flitted across his face. He sank a couple of inches, but we were wedged tightly in the narrow space and he could not fall forward. His gun hand started downward, but I was ready for it. I grabbed his wrist and gave it a sharp twist, putting all my strength in it. I felt his wristbone snap. A groan found its way through his clenched teeth. The gun fell to the deck. Swiftly I moved aside and let him slump down. Digging my fingers into his coat collar, I dragged him in the open deck space of the cabin, where I administered half a dozen hard kicks with the ball of my naked heel in the region of his kidneys. He gave out one high yelping sound and lay still. I dove for his gun, flicked off the cabin light and tiptoed to the companionway.

This time I took no chances. As soon as I could bring up the gun I aimed at Tan Topcoat, pulling the trigger. The gun jumped in my fist, once, twice, a third time. The fourth time glass tinkled, because Tan Topcoat lay in a crumpled heap under the wheel. I dragged him to the open cockpit. When I stepped back to the wheel I slipped on something soft and warm. I jumped, cursing. The tension had

been too much. Although I had hated him while he had been alive, now that he was dead I felt no personal animosity toward him, only disgust at having stepped in his blood. I went below, fetched a blanket which I threw over the dark stains on the deck, then I stepped behind the wheel once more. The submarine had come closer. I could see her conning tower rise over the wave crests. Her Aldin's lamp flashed urgently. I put my engines in neutral and flipped the radio telephone on. It took the set some time to warm up. When I heard the faint crackle of static emit from the speaker, I pressed the microphone button.

"Mayday, Mayday, Mayday," I heard myself say, and it sounded strange because I had never had to use my radio for an emergency call, "this is charter boat Medusa, charter boat Medusa, charter boat Medusa; Mayday, charter boat Medusa, approximately six miles due south-south west of Fire Island light, on a course from Jones Inlet 146 degrees magnetic. I have a message of national importance. Coast Guard, please reply. This is the Medusa, over." I released the microphone button and listened for an answer. None came forward and I checked the controls on my set. I swore loudly and twisted the frequency selector. I had transmitted on the wrong band. Then I had the right frequency of 2182 kilo cycles and immediately the speaker blared

forth with a garble of voices. Again I pressed the microphone button and repeated my entire message. Expectantly I released the button. Out of the babble of messages rose a clear voice, which drawled in unmistakable Georgia dialect: "Medusa, this is the Coast Guard, git off the pea-pickin' air, we got a emergency on our hainds . . ."

"The hell with you," I yelled back, "I've got that damn sub again on my hands, come and get the sonnavabitch!"

But I knew it was no use. The air waves were filled with a cacophony of voices and I could not get a word in edgewise. When I looked up again, the sub's Aldin's lamp had gone black. In its place the white finger of a searchlight stabbed across the heaving waters. I practically threw myself at the controls: Before the searching finger had reached the Medusa, her engines roared in protest and her flanks dug in. She slugged it out with the next big swell, then her stern was turned to the sub. While I fished in my shirt pocket for a crumpled cigarette pack, I heard the plane's engines for the first time. It's sound electrified me. My eyes were searching the murky overcast when the plane dropped its first flare. Brilliant white light illuminated the scene. The sub, its conning tower ugly and grey, streaked with rust, still squatted close to the stern of my boat. The raucous voice of a Klaxon horn

emitted from open hatches: crash dive! Aa-ooohga . . . aa-ooohga . . . aa-oogha . . . At the same time the huddle of men around the heavy machine gun on the sub's foredeck had spotted me and opened fire, while others scrambled madly for the open hatches. Orders were shouted. But then the plane, having dropped another flare, appeared out of the overcast. The firing of the machine gun stopped. The plane made one full sweep around the sub, its signal light blinking. There was no response from the sub. Instead, the gun crew swung the machine gun around started firing at the plane.

Any well-run submarine, manned by competent officers and an efficient crew can dive in less than a minute. But this sub had neither. Confusion reigned. All the while the Klaxon, like a living thing by itself, rasped in exact intervals. Air hissed and gurgled from diving tanks, while someone else had started the Diesel engines.

The plane banked sharply and steeped into a low gliding dive. Its machine guns winked. Tracer bullets streaked, probed for the sub, raked her deck and converged on her conning tower. Almost too late I realized the Medusa was in the plane's firing line. A fraction of a second later I lay flat on my face, while the tracer bullets slapped into my boat. Glass and wood splintered, my engines ground to a stop. The plane whooshed low over

the Medusa, banked gracefully and slid into another strafing run. Without thinking I dove over the side and kept diving, until the pressure on my eardrum became unbearable.

At the same time I heard, clearly transmitted by the water, the sounds of the battle on the surface: the hard metallic hammering of the plane's bullets puncturing the sub's steel hull, the throb of her Diesels, the grinding noise of her propellers, the plopping sounds of bullets striking the water surface, then a muffled explosion. Then all noises ceased, except the hiss and bubble of air escaping from the submarine. It sounded like a pre-historic sea monster breathing.

I had to come up for air and stroked to the surface. Searing heat struck my face: the Medusa was on fire, a flaming torch, roaring like a wounded animal, her wood crackling and bursting. She was afire from stem to stern, belching fat black smoke, which the wind carried away, close to the water's surface. I turned and swam away, until the sting of the heat lessened. Then I looked for the sub.

Only her conning tower was visible, from which men vaulted into the boiling water, and a few seconds later even the conning tower slid under. Still heads kept popping up from the rush of bubbling water where the sub had gone down, shouting and screaming.

A big wave rolled over me, and while I was under water, I heard

the hum of high-powered engines and the high-pitched whine of many propellers. They sounded familiar. When I came up again, borne to the crest of another big wave, I saw the stabbing beams of search lights, framed by red and green and white running lights. Then the low white silhouettes of the Coast Guard boats hove into view.

They bore down on a cluster of floating humanity. Engines were throttled back, lines flung out. While the two picket boats rolled in the long swells, the sub's survivors were pulled on board. One of the boats carefully circled the burning Medusa, which now was laying low in the water, the flames which consumed her less intense. The picket boat's search light swept the waters, then focused on me. I squinted in the white glare, waved my arms and hollered. Seconds later the sharp prow of the picket boat hovered over me. A line slapped in the water next to my head. I reached for it and the line was hauled tight. Strong hands pulled me roughly over the railing.

"Thank God," I gasped, but nobody paid attention to me, instead I was pushed down into the tiny cabin, where the sub's crew—or what was left of it—huddled on the deck in a steaming, smelly pack. A young Coast Guard kid, packing a .45, stood over them.

"Hey now, that's enough," I said.

The kid snapped at me: "Shut up, get down on the deck."

I was flabbergasted. "Say, what's the matter with you guys, you gone off your rockers or something?"

"Shut up and get down, god-dammit!" yelled the kid.

Resignedly I sat on the deck.

"Listen, sailor," I said, trying to control my voice, "I am an American. I was the skipper of that charter boat the Navy plane shot up and set on fire. I don't belong to this bunch of characters here. They almost knocked me off two months ago. Let me talk to your rating in charge of this boat. I can explain."

The kid squinted at me suspiciously, then he yelled over his shoulder: "Eh Cox, come here for a moment."

A sailor, hatless and encased in a life jacket, appeared in the door. "What's it you yelling for?"

"This guy here claims he is an American and the skipper of that pleasure boat that's burning out there. Says he don't belong to this gang here. Do you believe that?"

The sailor stepped into the cabin fully, giving me a long searching look. His gaze stopped halfway down my body.

"What's that you've got in your pants pocket?"

"He's got a gun," screamed the kid excitedly. It was true. I still had the Cuban's gun in my pocket. I had forgotten it completely.

"I took that off one of the two guys in my boat," I said, getting excited myself, reaching for the gun.

"Get your mitts up," snapped the

cox'n, while the kid pointed his .45 at my belly button. Obediently I raised my hands.

"Now turn around. And don't try any fancy stuff."

I obeyed again. The cox'n slipped his hand in my pocket and yanked the gun out. The wet fabric made it more difficult and I could feel the cox'n's hand shake. Finally he had extricated the gun.

"You guys watch too much television," I said savagely.

The answer was a kick in my rear, which sent me flying in a corner. Crouching in the corner, I turned around, seething with anger. "You're going to get it back, you bastard."

"I don't give a shit about you," hollered the cox'n, "I've got my orders to keep you guys covered until we get back to the base. There you can complain to the Chief, for all I care. Keep an eye on this guy, he's dangerous," he turned to the young sailor and left the cabin. He was scared too.

I exhaled deeply and sat down with my back against the cold bulkhead. Then I began to shiver and shiver and shiver, in unison with the vibrations the picket boat's big engine.

An hour later we were all herded in a corner of the mess room at the Coast Guard station. Two sailors with rifles at waist level stood guard. A Chief Warrant Officer throned behind a mess table, note pad and pencil ready.

"Anyone of you speak English?"

I stepped forward. The Chief looked at me unkindly. He had the face of a bulldog and a double chin.

"Oh, you're the American," he said disgustedly, "what's your name?"

"Captain Chris Peddersen."

"Captain my arse," growled the Chief "where are you from?"

"East Rockaway."

"What were your dealings with the submarine?"

"No dealings, Chief, let me—"

"Look, Mac," the Chief bellowed, "I don't like you buccaneering guys at all, for my money you're nothing but a bunch of traitors, helping Castro, and then when you are caught, you try to be cute about it. Now you better open up and answer my question, before I work you over."

"But Chief," I implored, "you've got this all wrong, I had no dealings with the sub, on the contrary, they've tried to get me before, back in Summer—"

"No kidding," said the Chief sarcastically, "then what is a supposedly honest party boat skipper doing out there in the middle of the night, meeting a submarine of which we don't know the nationality yet, if not for some shady dealings, the nature of which I want to know?"

"Chief," I said levelly, "would you please do me a favor and call the FBI, this case is over your head."

"The FBI, Mac," sneered the

Chief, "has been called already. It's going to be Leavenworth for you, I guarantee you."

"It's alright, Chief," said a voice in the back of the room. The voice carried authority. It stepped up in the lamp light. The voice belonged to a civilian. My mouth fell open.

The Chief turned on his stool: "Who the hell are you?"

The civilian reached in his breast pocket, pulled out a small leather case and flipped it open. A shiny metal budge glittered. The Chief squinted at it. Then he jumped to attention. "I am sorry, Sir."

The civilian smiled benevolently at the Chief. "It's alright, son. I should have been here earlier, but I had a flat on the way." He pocketed the small leather case. He turned to me and stepped over. His hand shot out.

"Glad to see you alive, Peddersen."

"Likewise," I stuttered, "you guys from the press sure are fast operators."

"The press," he chuckled. "I am Commander Frank Lotti, U.S. Naval Intelligence. Now let's get you in some dry togs."

Some time later we sat in the Chief's office, drinking hot coffee. The crisp new undress white one of the Coast Guard boys had loaned me scratched my skin. Commander Lotti slouched in the Chief's desk chair. The Chief sat on a straight chair, an unhappy look on his bulldog face.

Lotti put his coffee mug down. "Don't let it get you, Chief."

"No Sir," replied the Chief, looking unhappier. His double chin quivered.

"Well, let me explain to you two what this was all about. Of course, keep it under your hats. This is an order," he turned to the Chief.

"Aye aye, Sir," mumbled the Chief.

"That goes for you too, Peddersen."

I nodded.

"The whole thing goes a while back," Lotti began, urging life into a well-worn pipe. After he had gotten up a good head of steam, he continued. "We had intelligence reports that a 'ghost' submarine operated in our coastal waters. We knew about the Russian's subs all along. Only this 'ghost' sub did not fit in the pattern. By which I mean it wasn't one of the subs the Russians are building. Finally we traced it. It was a boat built by the East German Navy, especially built for shoal water service in the Baltic. We did not know if it had an East German, Russian or God-knows-what crew. Here we were stumped. If it was crewed by the Russians we had to handle it with kid gloves, because of the international situation connected with it. If it was crewed by East Germans, we had a similar situation on our hands, with the Berlin problem and all involved, you can imagine that for yourself. It was a hot potato, no

matter how you look at it. Yet we could not just let it operate and get away with whatever it was up to. But, if it had for instance a Cuban crew, it would have been a different situation, and you can figure for yourself the propaganda value 'Foggy Bottom' would have gotten out of it. In any case, we had to find out, under what flag the sub sailed, and then we had to try to capture her with her crew alive. In order to do this, we had to lure her to a convenient spot. That's where you came into the picture," Lotti swivelled around to face me.

"How, and why me?"

"Let me explain. We had developed some entirely new underwater detection instruments. It's still all very hush-hush. Just to give you an idea, with these gadgets we could record a conversation held inside a sub a couple of hundred feet below the surface, cruising in the middle of a school of fish. It's too complicated to go into details. But with this new system we would be in a position to actually determine the mother tongue of a submarine's crew. So far so good. On the other hand, we could not install the equipment in a naval vessel, or for that matter, in any commercial boat, without scaring our enemy away. After all, these people are by nature suspicious. So what we did, we looked up and down the Atlantic coast, until we found two identically built charter boats. One belonged to Peddersen here,

the other one to an old charter captain in Buzzard's Bay. The old boy was willing to sell us the boat for a good price, and retired. Then we rigged the boat out with our instruments. Now mind you, every day in the year charter boats take passengers to the fishing grounds, so we were reasonably certain the enemy would not see anything in a charter boat full of landlubbers that would arouse suspicion. Only our 'landlubbers' were intelligence boys, and they had themselves a ball, going fishing in the line of duty every day. Little by little we zeroed in on our 'ghost' sub. One day we had luck, and were right on top of her. When we re-recorded our tapes in the lab, we heard Spanish spoken, and were certain the sub was manned by Cubans.

So part one of the task was accomplished. Now came part two, to get the sub to a suitable place. We retired our charter boat to an obscure place in the Potomac, and began to leak out the story, that we had such and such a private charter boat rigged out with such and such gear, and that we were on the sub's tail. The Cubans of course did not like to see their game spoiled, and thought of getting hold of the one and only boat which could end their game. Not only to eliminate their most potential opponent, but also to bring home the prize, the secret equipment installed in our charter boat. So we fed them the name and location of the Medusa.

The word filtered down the proper channels, and they took the bait. In due time the word was passed on to the Cuban underground in New York City, to get the Medusa out in the open sea, where the 'ghost' submarine could capture her, strip her of her gear in some quiet spot, and then sink her without a trace. Of course, who ever was on the Medusa would get a shot in the neck."

"Thanks, pal," I said quietly.

"We had you under observation," said Lotti consolingly, "and we were ready too. So the Cubans used the oldest and simplest trick in the book, taking into consideration the usual human angles, they sent a hot dame to beguile the skipper of the Medusa. It worked like a charm, Lover-Boy here fell for it, hook, line and sinker."

Lotti looked at me with the look a father might reserve for his oldest male off-spring, who brought home from his first date a dose of a social disease; it was partly pride and partly disapproval. My face reddened.

"So far everything went according to schedule. The woman the Cubans sent had been living in New York long enough to know the lay of the land. She was a trained agent. She brought a short-wave set with her, disguised as a portable radio. The sub had orders to rendezvous with the Medusa at a certain point at a certain time. The agent sent her message on time,

the sub monitored it and homed in on it. The rest was simple. With one exception. We did not know the frequency they were using, and by the time we found it, we could not get a good cross bearing on it, and so we could not get to the spot where the sub had surfaced. To make things more exciting, Peddersen suddenly remembered his red-blooded American manhood and put up a fight. The Cuban's attempt to capture the Medusa was botched. When Peddersen was found that night, his boat was spattered with blood, the county marine police got in on the act and promptly blew the whistle on him. So he wound up in the pokey, because his story was too fantastic. There was nothing we could do for him, because the dust had to settle first. Meanwhile the boys from CIA had gotten wind of his story and paid him a visit in jail. But the whole deal was so touchy that we could not let the CIA have him. So we had him sprung. Meanwhile we had his boat fixed up, because we were sure there would be a repeat performance. We had to let the Cubans believe that the Medusa had come off without much damage and would be back in service shortly. While we had the Medusa in the boatyard, one of our bright boys from the office had a brainstorm: why not outfit the Medusa with a homing devise? So we installed a small UHF transmitter in the bow of the boat, where Peddersen would

not find it, and gave it a nice chrome flag staff for an aerial. We hooked the transmitter up to one of his generators, so every time Peddersen ran his engines, the transmitter received power and became automatically operational. It worked like a charm, we tried it out while we brought the Medusa back to her old slip. Incidentally, as soon as we had filtered the news to the Cubans that the Medusa was back, their agents hot-footed it out to East Rockaway, but we had our men drink beer in Chet's bar, and hang around generally in the neighborhood. The Cubans waited for Peddersen to get back on the boat, and as soon as they thought the coast was clear, they paid him a nocturnal visit."

I had listened with increasing interest. Now I could not hold back a question. "But how could you know how I would react once I got out of jail?"

"Well," Lotti grinned, "we had to feel you out first. For that purpose I intercepted you the moment you got out of jail, and dragged you to dinner, and you know what kind of a conversation we had after dinner. I could not let you in on the secret, and on the other hand we could not gauge the extent of your loyalty, after the dirty deal you had gotten from us. That's why I passed myself off as a newspaper man."

"Yes yes," I grinned back, "the New York Daily Press. Only there

is no such animal. I read papers too, you know. Even if I have to take off my shoes to count more than ten. Next time you better think of a better gimmick."

"Next time," Lotti chuckled, "we conscript you and put you in leg irons."

"Why you sonnavagun," I said distinctly and helped myself to a second mug of coffee.

"Well, to get back to our story, we had Peddersen rigged up as our decoy, and this time the Cubans wanted him real bad. It had become a personal thing with them. So they sent two of their hardest characters to pay him a friendly social call while he was sacked out after a night of boozing, got his boat off the dock and forced him to meet the sub on the same spot as once before. Only this time, our men watched the game from the shore, and as soon as Peddersen started his engines we picked him up on half a dozen sets along the coast. We got excellent cross bearings this time, and eventually we spotted the sub on our radar sets. We were ready. Only, the meeting did not take place at the right time. Something went wrong. Got any ideas, Peddersen?"

"I think I do," I said over my coffee mug, "they had trouble with their portable, so we didn't rendezvous with the sub on the original spot, but further out."

"Could be your UHF set jammed the portable or the receiver on the

sub. We'll have to find out in the lab. Whatever it was, we had trouble on our end too. I was at Floyd Bennett Field when I received the signals from our boys. I had a Grumman Amphibian standing by for the final closing with the sub. But the Grumman had engine trouble, and we had to send a sub-hunter plane instead. In the scramble the boys got their wires crossed, and when the sub fired back at them they got down to business and used their guns, and the gunner had not been instructed to spare your boat. In fact, everybody thought the Medusa and the Cuban submarine were in cahoots. There had been no time to brief everybody."

"You mean to say," I gasped, "they shot up the Medusa on purpose?"

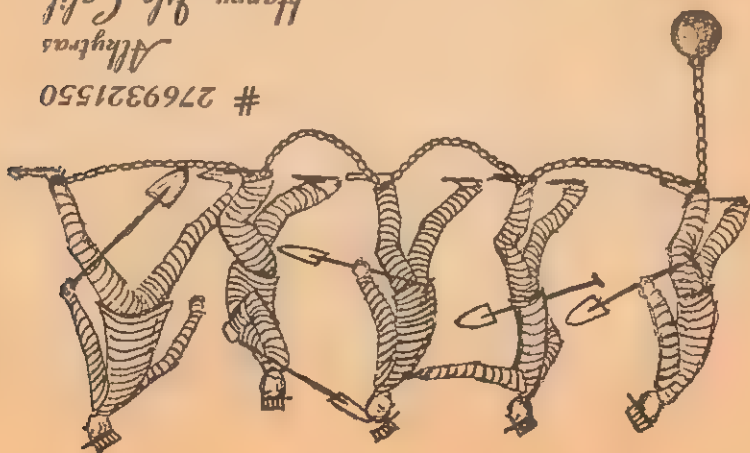
"Well, they didn't want to set her afire, but they wanted to prevent the Medusa from getting away. Tomorrow our divers'll go out and bring up the sub. We have the spot marked and a Navy boat standing by. Of course, we'll reimburse you for your personal losses, and besides we have a boat ready for you on the Potomac. In a couple of days you fly with me to Washington, and we'll let you have her fitted out any way you want to. It's on the house," he added with a grin.

"You bet," I said grimly, "I was on my way to Florida."

"You'll get there yet," Lotti rose and slapped me on the back. "How

about taking me along, on one of your famous leisure cruises, course south-east by south? Life is pretty dull at times." We both burst out laughing. Only the Chief didn't join us.





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Allytras

Happy 90s, Calif.

Dear Sam (The Big Man) Grouly,

Boas, I met this lifer here who's been writin' his experiences for this cool little magazine called

Manhunt. It's a real hip sheet.

Well, I'm now writin' my life story for them...

the straight stuff. Let the world see that we're just a regular bunch of guys doin' a job. And, Boas, I'm gonna get you and all the boys in it... how you set me up in business... the works! Imagine,

havin' a literary giant in the mob?

The Warden's tickled pink. I got my own office, typewriter, stenographer, and a couple of armed screws outside the door so I won't be disturbed.

Well... back to my dictation. Best to the boys.

Yours faithfully,
Canary Cal

P.S.

See back cover

sore



loser

Like that horse you can lead to water . . . you could give Leary the best advice in the world, but you sure as hell couldn't make him take it.

BY FRANK SISK

BANKO's Gym is directly across a sad-looking city street from Keeler's Bar & Grill, Ladies Invited, and every day except Sunday there is a sporadic interchange of customers between these two places. In Banko's we watch the fighters work out and discuss the horses; in Keeler's we drink the beverages and discuss the horses. And occasionally, following some unknown cue, we interrupt the routine to speculate on the unhappy relationship that existed be-

tween two of the regulars—Duff Leary and PeeWee Bowser—who are no longer present.

Duff Leary managed (mismanaged might be better) a few fighters. Until he got hold of Pepper Peters, his best fighter was probably himself. Leary was one of these abrasive personalities with a thick skin and a head to match. He knew all the wrong answers and would willingly defend them, when drinking, against any man half his size. Nobody on this street

ever pretended to like him, except PeeWee Bowser, but it was considered advisable to tolerate him. He was largely lard, yet a big tub of it.

Bowser, a small conciliatory man, was a freelance accountant whose living came from one-arm restaurants, second-run theaters, pawn shops and standup gin mills. He first drifted into the neighborhood by way of going over Keeler's books once a month and soon was accepted as a regular. He was a quiet colorless character except for one thing—he liked to be helpful to his fellow man. And his help always took the form of giving earnest advice. Horses, women, politics, dieting were just a few of the subjects about which, in his soft-spoken way, Bowser wished to be helpful.

This little failing was so human that nobody paid much attention to it, with the exception of Leary. Leary hated all advice, good or bad, and he particularly hated Bowser's from the beginning. The little guy got off on the wrong foot, you might say, but then nobody ever got off on the right foot with Duff Leary.

When Bowser told Leary that Pepper Peters was championship material, he was expressing the consensus around Banko's Gym. He was saying what Leary was beginning to suspect himself.

"But I'd bring him along slow," Bowser added guilelessly. "I wouldn't train him too fine yet."

"What the hell would a twerp like you know about it?" asked Leary.

"Only what I hear around, Duff. Your wife was telling me a few days ago that Pep has the temperament of a boxer, not a fighter. And she ought to know. She discovered him, didn't she?"

Leary's bloated face turned a shade redder than usual. "She *what?*"

"She was saying he's light for a light heavy and ought to be brought along and beefed up slow, Duff."

"I mean about discovering the bum? About that?"

"What about it, Duff? All's I know is what I hear around."

Bowser had heard aright. One day, a few months earlier, Kay Leary had come to Banko's with a message for her husband and had remained awhile to watch what went on. She spotted Pepper Peters drumming the bag. It was all new to her, but with the fresh insight of a woman she saw in Peters a speedy gracefulness that wasn't apparent in the other fighters working on the premises. Before she left she said to all of us generally and not directly to her husband, "That guy's manager sure has a winner."

Well, it so happened that Peters didn't have a manager. He wasn't even a pro—just a kid that came to Banko's for the exercise. Next day Leary signed him up.

After Bowser's advice on how

Peters should be trained, Leary set up a work schedule that could have whittled Tony Galento down to a welterweight.

A couple of days later, Bowser walked into Keeler's and sidled up to Leary at the bar. "Apologies, Duff," he said sincerely, "for sticking my nose where it don't belong. I mean the other day about Peters."

"Aw, shut up," said Leary.

"Let me buy a drink, Duff. No offense."

"I wouldn't take a drink off you if I was dying of thirst," said Leary.

"I'm just trying to be friends," said Bowser plaintively.

"I got enemies I like better," snapped Leary, and left without finishing his beer.

The next afternoon in Banko's a special tip circulated among a favored few concerning a horse named Toot Sweet. This nag, a weary one from way back, was practically certified as a long-shot winner in the third race at Rockingham that afternoon and the odds were insulting. The wise boys, Leary among them, were crowding around the handbook in order to place their bets before the deadline when Bowser showed up. Tugging gently at Leary's sleeve, he delivered, in a stage whisper, what is called coals to Newcastle.

"Just to prove there's no hard feelings, Duff, here's something plenty hot. Toot Sweet in the third at—"

Leary jerked his sleeve free. "Go soak your head, ya little jackass."

The rest of us laughed and completed our transactions. But Leary angrily switched his bet from Toot Sweet to Happy King. Later, after the payoff, when the Toot Sweeters went across to Keeler's for a celebration, Leary was brooding over the bar like a thundercloud. Bowser approached him with fatuous innocence.

"I wish you'd took my tip, Duff."

"I wish you'd drop dead," growled Leary.

"Don't take it so hard, Duff. I'll get you a sure thing tomorrow. I know a guy inside at Belmont."

"You better get outside right now before I pound you through the floor."

"Okay, okay, Duff. Take it easy." Bowser backed away. "But you'll see I'm good as my word."

And he was too. He came up the following day with a ten-to-one shot called Baby Sitter. As a show of confidence in the little man Joe Milton placed a hundred on the nose and the rest of us followed suit with lesser sums. All except Leary. He played the favorite, Pequot Beau, which ran a leisurely fourth in the same race that saw Baby Sitter out in front by four lengths.

By now it was becoming evident to all of us that the big boy was in a bad way. His judgment was no longer in his own hands. As Joe Milton put it, "It's got to the point

where Leary would bet on a Democratic victory in Vermont if Bowser advised him against it."

To make matters worse, we were beginning to hear rumors that Leary's domestic life was not faring much better than his public one. Our sympathies were with Kay, of course, but we never expressed them aloud. We not only hoped that the husband would be the last to find out—we hoped he'd *never* find out. But we overlooked Bowser's strange attachment to Leary.

It happened one quiet afternoon in Keeler's. The big man was in a black mood at the far end of the bar by himself. Something sharp appeared to be gnawing at his vitals and he was trying to drown it with boilermakers. We were letting him strictly alone when in walked Bowser. The little man, an expression of condolence on his face, went directly to Leary and patted him gently on the back.

"It's a time when a feller needs a friend," he said softly.

Leary violently shrugged off the sympathetic hand. "Fade, squirt, or I'll wring your bloody neck."

"Don't take it so tough, Duff. Pep's only a kid yet."

"Yeah, I know. And I'm training him too fine. Now fade, squirt, before I slug ya."

"Okay, if that's your attitude. But the way I see it, he'll outgrow her after awhile. He's only twenty-one and Kay must be at least thir-

ty. Correct me if I'm wrong."

Leary got his elbows off the bar and looked around and down at Bowser. "What in hell you talking about?" he demanded.

We were all holding our breathing to a minimum.

Bowser's expression now changed to one of surprise. "Why, gee, Duff," he said apologetically. "I didn't mean to talk out of turn. I thought you knew."

Leary now knew. Rage leaped like a flame across his heavy face. Before anyone could interfere he backhanded the little man across the chops. Then, finishing his drink in a gulp, he lurched to the street.

Blood was trickling from Bowser's lips as Joe Milton helped him off the floor. His usually kind eyes were, briefly, as hard as buttons, but when he spoke his voice was a conciliatory purr.

"I had it coming. Talking out of turn like that. Duff's all right when you get to know him."

"So's a rogue elephant," said Joe Milton.

We learned a few days later, via the newspaper columnists, that Kay Leary had left her husband's bed and board for temporary refuge in a hotel while seeking a restraining order from the court. The purpose of the order was to enjoin said husband to keep his distance.

Leary was taking these developments with double ryes in Keel-

er's one morning when Bowser, the essence of friendly advice, approached him with these words:

"Forgive and forget, Duff. But never give up hope."

Leary gritted his teeth. "Stow it, Bowser, or so help me I'll kill ya."

"The way to a woman's heart is through kindness," Bowser said, unafraid.

"I'm warning ya."

"If I was you, I'd send her flowers, Duff."

"Knock it off or *you'll* be the one getting the flowers."

"No, seriously, Duff. First flowers and then an invitation to a fancy restaurant for dinner. That's the ticket. Even our own boy, Pep Peters, could tell you that."

This time Bowser ducked, and Mike the bartender got between them.

Next morning's paper carried the headline *Fight Manager KO's Mate in Divorce Prelim*, and the writer kicked the analogy around for a half column. A hotel bellhop had thrown in the towel after the knockdown and called the cops. It had taken four bluecoats to remove Leary to the locker room where he was booked for assault and battery and contempt of court. Mrs. Leary, upon hearing that her sparring partner was later released on bail, announced that she was immediately retiring to a neutral corner of Florida where she could obtain a divorce without further violence.

Bowser's comments on the fracas

were now awaited with new respect by the gentlemen of the neighborhood.

"I went his bail," Bowser told us with something that was not quite pride and not quite boast but subtly in between.

"I'm almost sorry for the poor bastard," Joe Milton said.

"Me too," said Bowser placidly. "I says to him just a few hours ago, I says, 'Listen, Duff, you've had enough tough luck lately, so why don't you go away somewhere for a rest. Sort of lay low like. And anyhow,' I says, 'keep clear of Pep Peters by all means. At least till he's cooled off. Because he's taking all this pretty personal,' I says."

"And what did Leary say to all this?" asked Joe Milton.

But before Bowser could answer, the subject himself entered Keeler's sporting a face that looked as if it had collided with a whetstone. He barked for a drink, displaying the absence of several front teeth.

"Dammit, Duff," said Bowser, "I wish for once—just for once—that you'd take a little of my advice."

"Why, you little crock," Leary shouted, "I wouldn't take your advice if my life depended on it."

"That's an awful thing to say, Duff."

"Aw, shut up." Leary turned his glowering gaze on the rest of us. "And I want all you other clowns to know this too. I ain't afraid of any two-bit fighter that ever lived. Peters had his round, but mine is

coming up. I'm suing that louse for every nickel he's got—breach of contract, assault, the works. The sheriff's probably slapping the papers on him right now."

"In Florida?" Bowser asked quietly.

Leary lowered his glass and stared hard at his little nemesis. "You mean that two-timing rat has gone to Florida."

"Why, yes, Duff. His plane left about thirty minutes ago."

Slamming his glass on the bar, Leary rushed to the door. Bowser trotted after him, saying, "Now, Duff, don't do anything rash. Just this once take my advice and you won't regret it."

That was the last time anyone around here ever saw Leary.

Bowser came back just once. It was that same afternoon.

"Get your buddy off to Florida?" asked Joe Milton.

"Yeah, but he wouldn't listen to me." The little man ordered a beer and sipped it sadly. "The way his luck's been running, I advised him to play it safe. I told him to take a train. What difference does a day make?" Bowser shook his head unhappily. "But not him. Nope. He

has to take the first plane out, and an unscheduled flight at that. Too bad. He wasn't a bad guy and he could have used a friend."

Joe Milton glanced at the bartender. Both noticed that Bowser seemed to be referring to Leary in the past tense and, as it turned out, quite properly.

Nowadays when the subject arises in Banko's or Keeler's, somebody usually says, "But he was playing one hell of a long shot, wasn't he? That that particular plane would crash?"

"Of course," says Joe Milton. "But the little guy was hot and Leary was cold. When you're that hot, you can't lose. And when you're like Leary, you can't win."

"I wonder why he never comes around here any more?" somebody always wonders. "The little guy, I mean."

"Because he was the big winner here," Joe Milton explains. "And big winners never come back again."

"I wonder where he hangs out now?"

"I don't know," Joe Milton says. "But wherever it is, the jokers better be listening to him."



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With his record, the last thing in the world Pete Mavrey needed was cops. But, what else do you get when a corpse turns up in your living-room.

IT WAS Saturday, and I was sitting in my Ford across the street from the First Californian Bank of Santa Cruz, waiting for Anna to get off work.

I could see her inside the bank, smiling at a customer; and, if you ask me, a smile from Anna gave you your money's worth whether you ever drew any interest on your money or not.

I rolled up the window to shut off the cold fog that was blowing in from the ocean the way the local boosters say is unusual for June; and I opened the San Francisco paper I'd bought.

The first thing I saw was the garish headline . . .

S.F. BEAUTY FEARED SLAIN

As a headline, it was nothing any big city doesn't see three or four times a year. Then I glanced down at the picture to see if she was really a beauty or not, and it was like the bottom had dropped out of my stomach. I looked at that picture, and I read the story, and I just plain didn't believe it.

. . . car identified as property of Bernice Falknor, 25, found abandoned . . . lonely stretch of road near Walnut Creek . . . much blood . . . nearby, a bloodstained slip bearing the attractive brunette's initials . . . one shoe near road . . . signs of a struggle . . . body not found yet . . . police fear same killer who last year brutally murdered wealthy Oakland matron . . .

Kill and Run

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY FLOYD MAHANNAH

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KILL AND RUN

111

My God, Bernice had really done it.

Good grief, I'd thought it was just a game, the kind of game Bernice liked to play now and then: a suppose-you-had-a-million, or a suppose-you-married-a-movie-star kind of game. Only that night it has been suppose-you-wanted-to-disappear.

I read the newspaper story again.
My God!

We'd been eating spaghetti in the cafe over near Carmel, and talking about whether to go to a movie or wait a while and go to a night club, without either of us being much interested. At least I wasn't—I was trying to think up some way to tell her about being engaged to Anna; and, like all the other times I'd tried, I couldn't come up with anything that didn't sound noble or coray.

Bernice stopped right in the middle of a sentence, and said, "Suppose you wanted to disappear?"

"Why?"

"It doesn't matter why. Just suppose."

"The why part is important."

"How?"

"It makes the difference between cops chasing you or not. Cops can make disappearing plenty tough."

"Wouldn't they look for you anyway?"

"Sure, but they look differently for crooks."

Bernice thought about that, her head cocked on one side. Her hair

was black, a shining coal black; and her eyes were dark blue, but in this light they looked black too.

Sometimes, like a minute ago, you'd say she had a pleasant enough face, but she was no beauty like the papers claimed; then something like this suppose-you-wanted-to-disappear thing would catch her fancy, and it was like it had triggered a switch inside her—sort of started the electricity flowing.

She said, "All right, put it this way: you're fed up with your life and your friends, and you just want to disappear and start all over some place else. What would you do?"

"Sit on a box of dynamite, and light her up."

She laughed, and you wanted to hear more of it. "Silly—you want to disappear, not die."

The plan I came up with then was nothing I'd ever had in my head before. You understand, I just wanted something that would hold her fancy, and keep her interested and shining the way she was.

"Simply walking away and never coming back would be no good." I told her. "Your friends, your boss, lots of people would go to the police. And sooner or later they'd find you."

She nodded. "I can see that. How about putting a suicide note and your coat on a dark pier some night, and then walking away?"

"Better, but not good enough. Bodies float after a while. They'd wonder if they didn't find one."

"Also," she said, "this person might be wanting to get away from someone who would put private detectives on her trail unless he was certain she was dead."

"Oh, so it's a woman who wants to disappear?"

"Sure, let's make it a woman."

"Miss Bernice Falknor?"

She grinned. "Don't be a dope. Call her Miss X."

"She pretty?"

"A knockout."

"Fine. That makes it perfect for a good juicy sex slaying."

"Nothing doing. This woman doesn't want to die."

"She doesn't have to."

"What do you mean?"

I teased her with it. "Don't you see an angle?"

"Go on, smarty." Her eyes reflected light from the fire like a cat. "Tell it."

"Okay. Remember last year, that Oakland woman who was killed? They found the bloodstained car, but the body didn't turn up until just recently. With any luck—for the killer, I mean—the body never would have been found at all. The killer hasn't been found."

"I begin to get it." She rolled it around in her mind. "As you say, it has originality. Spell it out more plainly for me."

"Your Miss X would follow the same pattern—up to a point. Incidentally she had better be well heeled; this trick will cost money. She'll need a second car to stake out

near where she's going to leave her bloodstained one. The bloodstained job will be a total loss except for her heirs."

"Miss X hasn't any heirs. Go on."

"Well, she abandons her car with a lot of her blood on the floor and upholstery, some hair torn from her head, maybe a fingernail or two broken off—all evidence of a struggle. And there should be evidence of a struggle outside on the ground too—maybe a shoe, and a bloodstained underthing or two. Say, aren't the tabloids going to love our Miss X?"

Bernice looked fascinated. "Sure, she could use chicken blood, and—"

"Whoa."

"What's the matter?"

"Chicken blood is no good. Cops would spot that in the lab. It would have to be human blood of her type. In fact, to be really, safe, it would have to be her blood. Maybe a pint. But that would be a cinch for, say, an ex-nurse like you, who knows all about transfusions and hypos and stuff."

"Miss X isn't an ex-nurse," Bernice said quickly. Maybe too quickly.

"Then you could show her how to open a vein or something. Or maybe she'd just figure a way. She sounds like a smart apple."

"She is. Phi Beta Kappa," Bernice said solemnly, "and all that."

"Then she's a cinch. She'd get away with it. That brings us to section two of her problem."

"Section two?"

"Sure, the escape and the new identity. She'd go to this second car, and drive all night and all the next day, getting as far away as possible; only sometime before daybreak she'd have to bleach or dye her hair, cut it, comb it a different way. She'd have to put on different, sloppier clothes, wear horn rimmed glasses, put her lipstick on differently—she couldn't be pretty any more—and mind you, she couldn't stop at any hotel to do it. It would have to be done entirely in the car, and most of it in the dark."

"That's a large order," Bernice said thoughtfully, "but I think Miss X could manage it."

"I think so. She sounds like a real brain. Look how well she's done so far."

"What does she do next?"

"Settles down. Just plain settles down. She gets a job—not any kind of work she has ever done before. She's interested in different things, talks differently, walks differently, and, if she can, thinks differently. She does all that and carries a rabbit's foot, and she'd probably make it. Only I doubt if she'll ever give it a try."

"Why not? She's a pretty determined gal."

"It's too expensive. You figure the car is only the beginning. She'd lose all her clothes, jewelry, keepsakes, even her bank account—she couldn't draw much out without causing suspicion. She couldn't take a single

thing with her, except what she'd be normally wearing when murdered."

"Poor Miss X." Bernice clucked her tongue. Then she grinned. "Pete, I think I'd like the night club. That sounds like it would be fun."

It was too.

And it was one more Saturday night I didn't tell her about Anna.

Somebody opening the car's door on the other side dragged me back from all this. It was Anna, of course.

"Hello, Pete." In the cheerful, bank-teller's voice I was always trying to kid her out of. "What's the matter?"

"Matter?"

"I could see you over here for ten minutes, just sitting here and scowling at that newspaper. What's the matter—find your name in the obituaries?"

"I guess I was thinking."

"About all your other girl friends?" she said kidding.

"Sure, all forty-four of them." I started the car.

"What's in the paper?" She looked at it. "Another murder. From your face a moment ago, any-boy would think you'd—" She broke off quickly, glancing at me to see if I'd noticed what she was about to say.

I wasn't sensitive about it. Not the word, nor the thought of it. I'd told her that a hundred times. It was done and dead and paid for. It

was like something that had happened to some other guy. She was the one who was sensitive about it. Her and Papa.

Papa.

"Listen," I said, "for once let's not spend Saturday evening with your folks."

"But you know how Papa counts on his Saturday nights."

"Just this once, Anna."

"It's their big night."

It was Papa's big night. I'll give it to Papa—he may have been a fat nuisance, but he worked hard. His boat was usually the first one out and the last one in. He made money and he didn't go out and fan it across the bars on Saturday night like so many of them did. His idea of a big Saturday night was to have you and the neighbors in, and load you up on Mama's cooking and that sour red wine he loved too well, and then talk your ear off about commercial fishing. Anna was saying:

"It's only one night."

"Look, we could drive up to San Francisco. I'll stake you to the Papagayo for dinner; afterwards we'll go to a concert." The concert part was bait. To me, they're a long pain in the ear, but Anna loves them.

She didn't even look tempted. She looked troubled. "I wish you and Papa got along better."

I didn't say anything.

"Just try to meet him half way."

"There's no such thing as meeting him half way."

"Oh, Pete."

"Like last Saturday night."

"I talked to him about that. He didn't really mean to bring up—that subject."

That subject. "Look, I've told you before. You don't have to walk a circle around every word in the language that means murder or prison. Let him talk about it if he wants to. It's a relief from his talk-talk-talk about fish."

She laughed, half embarrassed.

"How about San Francisco?" I said.

"Perhaps next week."

"Next week. Maybe next year, like the wedding."

"Please, Pete."

Please, Pete. I guess I was making it pretty tough for her—she loved the old rhinoceros—but it was tough for me too. Except for Papa, she and I would have been married a year ago, and the business with Bernice Falknor never would have happened.

We drove, not speaking for a while, then Anna said, "Please don't hate him. It's just that he loves me."

"I don't hate him."

And I didn't. To me, he was just another guy with a yard-long name I never did learn to spell. I never thought of it as being Anna's name, because it wasn't. Anna was tall and slenderly curved and golden-haired. Papa and Mama had adopted her as a baby. And, if you ask me, Papa was a lot more in love with her than he was with Mama.

I don't mean that the way it sounds. Papa was all right, I supposed, but the plain fact was he didn't want Anna to marry me or anybody else; and he'd go right on putting off the marriage as long as she'd let him. Which looked like a long time.

"Pete, we always seem to be arguing."

"I'm sorry."

She put her arm inside mine, and slid over closer to me, with her head on my shoulder for a moment. It wasn't anything electric, like Bernice. With Anna, it made you feel warm and solid inside, and you knew the way she made you feel and the way she felt wasn't something that could be turned off by either one of you. Sure, you wanted her as a woman; but with Anna, you wanted her as a wife too.

You wanted Anna and an evening on the town; and what you got was Papa and an earful of fish.

I stopped the car in front of her house, and Anna sat there with her head against my shoulder, then she sighed and moved away. She opened the door on her side.

"Aren't you coming in?"

"I guess not."

She sat there looking at me, her eyes brown and quietly troubled. "You'll be over tonight?"

"I don't know."

"What's the matter, Pete?"

"Nothing's the matter. Nothing new."

"It isn't just Papa, and the Satur-

day nights, and the delay. I mean that isn't all of it. Is it, Pete?"

"That's a hell of a lot of it."

"What else?"

"Nothing you'd be interested in."

"I'm interested in you."

I didn't say anything, and I sort of looked past her, like I wasn't much interested in what we were talking about. One thing sure: I wasn't going to be at Papa's Saturday night. This crazy Bernice thing had knocked me for a loop; and if I had to sit through four hours of Papa and fish and red wine with garlic, I was going to blow a fuse.

I said, "You better count me out tonight."

I was being sulky. I was acting like a dope. I could tell by her face that she saw the soreness in me, and she thought it was for her. But she didn't get mad. Maybe that was the trouble—she never really got mad. If just once me and Papa and her were to get snorting, go-to-hell mad at the same time, a lot of things would get threshed out. But she didn't get mad.

"All right, Pete. Call me tomorrow."

"All right."

She waited for me to kiss her, but I was really riding my sulky streak now. I gave her a kind of second-cousin peck, and she waited for more, and didn't get it; and finally she sighed and got out of the car.

"Goodbye."

"Bye."

I gunned the Ford away, and al-

ready I was sorry. It wasn't her fault. Like she said, all she wanted was for us to be happy. That was the trouble: she wanted too many people to be happy—her and me and Papa, all at once. The way it stood now, Papa was the only one that was getting any.

My place was a few miles up the canyon, where the big redwoods grow. It was just an oversized cabin, but I liked it under all those redwoods. It was isolated, it was cool, and at night, when the fog rolled up the canyon, the redwoods, way up there out of sight in it, would condense it into drops, so that all night long you'd hear it on your roof like rain. Maybe that last doesn't sound like anything special to you; but if you've been stuck out in the middle of a desert for three years you never wanted to think about again, it would.

I parked my car by the gate, and checked the mailbox. There was one letter in it. A plain white envelope, postmarked San Francisco yesterday, with no return address. I opened it.

Dear Pete:

A few lines so you won't be worried. Miss X thought your idea was wonderful—it solved a problem she was beginning to believe insoluble. By the time you get this, she will be well on her way. Wish her luck darling.

Her new name is:

Jessica Martingale

P.S. She has no address yet, but she will let you know.

In a way, I was relieved. In the back of my head had been the wonder if maybe the thing was some nightmare coincidence—that somebody really had murdered Bernice in the way I'd dreamed up. After I got over being relieved, I got irritated.

Of all the goofy, hairbrained stunts.

Her and her insoluble problem. I knew what her problem was, and it was nothing that couldn't have been solved by calling the cops and having them warn a guy to let her alone. But she had to do it this way—murder, headlines, half the cops in the state working on it! It was crazy, like using a piledriver to crack a peanut.

And when the cops caught up with her—as they would—there was going to be hell to pay.

I read the two other San Francisco papers, and they told the same story, and I walked a couple of hundred laps up and down the front room, and finally decided to go fishing. I didn't like talk about commercial fishing, the way Papa always talked, but I did like to sit and drop a line now and then.

I had been fishing the day I met Bernice.

I had just caught one of those fat silver perch, and killed and cleaned it; and I was casting out again. I made the cast, wound up

the slack, sat in my camp chair, and got my pipe going; and when I looked up again, Bernice was standing there.

I guess the first thing I noticed about her was her yellow dress. The wind had it plastered to her almost as tight as her own skin, and the figure under that dress was something you'd take a second look at.

Then I looked up at her face, and saw the bruise under her left eye, and the little trickle of blood at the corner of her mouth. But I think even that didn't impress me as much as how mad she was. You remember, I was telling you about that kind of electricity she had sometimes? Well, she had it now. She had it so strong you could almost smell the ozone in the air.

She was breathing hard like she'd been running, and she was looking straight at me without saying a word. With her standing there and looking so straight at me, I had to speak:

"Hello." Her voice had that charge, like her face.

"Have a fall on the rocks?"

"What?"

"You've got blood on your chin."

She got a handkerchief from the pocket of the dress, and dabbed at her chin. She wasn't carrying a purse.

Then the man came down the path to the rock.

He had brown hair, about the color of mine, but he was older than me, almost as big, and when he got

closer, I could see that while his face wasn't as mad as hers, still he was plenty steamed up. He was wearing three fresh claw marks on the side of his face, and they had dripped a few drops of blood onto an expensive tweed coat.

It looked to me like they'd battled the first round to a draw, then moved down to my rock to fight the second.

That's when my rod jerked strongly, and I yanked up to set the hook. I brought the fish in, and it was what I'd hoped it would be—a cabezone. Maybe six pounds, and my dinner for tonight.

"What is it?" She spoke like she was mad at it.

"Cabezone. Pretty thing, isn't it?"

"Yes."

They're not a bit pretty. They're green and dirty brown splotched, with a thick lumpy body, and a flat misshapen head, and a wide ugly mouth. I got this one on the cutting board, drove my knife through his spine, back of his head, and he died as quickly as that. I pulled out the knife, and blood welled up in the cut; and from the sound the woman made, she didn't much like the sight of it. Well, she didn't have to look.

When I looked up from trimming off the fins the man was almost as close as the woman, watching me work, and he had an interested, queer look on his face—and I mean queer. His eyes were pale

gray, somewhat flat looking; and I've cleaned a lot of fish in my time, but this was the first time I ever looked up to see some guy getting an honest-to-God kick out of watching me cut.

I soused the cabezone in a tide pool, and dropped it into the flour sack. The man said:

"Come on, Bernice. Let's go."

The woman looked at me like she hadn't heard. "What did you say it was?"

"Cabezone."

"Good to eat?"

"The best."

"The flesh—it was green."

"It turns white when it's cooked."

"Oh."

The man said, "Come on, Bernice."

She watched me bait up with mussels.

"Bernice, you'll freeze here without a coat."

No answer. So far as she was concerned, he wasn't there.

I made my cast, reeled in the slack, sat down, and the woman pointed at my fleece-lined jacket beside the camp chair. I had taken it off when the fog cleared, but I was still wearing a heavy sweater. She said:

"Is it all right if I sit on that?"

"Sure." What else could I say?

The man said, "Bernice!"

She sat down on the jacket, still acting like he was invisible; and he watched her, his face all tightened up again. She was close enough to

touch my chair now; and he said: "Come on. We'll be late for dinner."

Dinner meant nothing to her.

I looked down at her, the wind molding the thin dress to her body, and trailing her black hair out; and she was starting to shiver.

But she was still mad.

I looked at the guy with his pale, queer eyes, and back at the woman with her plain intention to stick close to me; and it was none of my business who they were, or how she got her face marked up. None of my business at all. So, like a dope, I said:

"If you're cold, you can put that jacket on."

"Thank you." She put it on.

The guy looked at me like he wished he had a knife and I was a cabezone.

It was like that a solid half hour.

I caught a few pieces of trash, threw them back, baited up, cast, reeled in; and nobody said a word. Not a damned word. Every time I'd look up, the guy would be watching Bernice and me, his face mad and stubborn, like he was going to stay there all night if she did; and so far as I could tell, she hadn't looked at him once. Nor at me.

A half hour of that was plenty. By then the fog bank had come back in to the edge of the breakers, and that fixed the fishing for today so far as I was concerned.

I took the hooks and sinker off

my line, unscoated and wiped the reel, and put the things away in my tackle box. I folded the camp chair, and now Bernice was watching me. I said:

"That's it for today."

The man said, "Give him his jacket."

She didn't. She said, "Are you going toward San Francisco?"

"Other way. Santa Cruz."

"Can I ride with you?"

What could I say? I said, "If you want to."

"Bernice, don't be a silly fool. I'll take you home."

She said to me, "Can I help you carry some of this stuff?"

"Take the chair."

"All right."

"Bernice, you listen to me—"

He had his fist doubled and his arm cocked, and Bernice was holding the chair like she was going to hit him with it; and since it was none of my fight, I stepped between them.

The fog was around us now like damp cotton, and I was so close to the guy I could smell the musky perfume he used, and see his small even teeth as he said:

"Butt out of this, mister. Butt out!"

He was blocking the path off the rock, and I was pretty tired of him anyway; so I guess there'd have been some knuckles skinned if the guys over in the lighthouse hadn't chosen that second to uncork that bull horn of theirs. Up close that

way, it's one hell of a horn, and it'll make you jump any time. But now, with everybody's nerves wound up, and us keyed up to tee off on each other, I swear it came out of that fog like the crack of doom. The guy nearly jumped out of his socks. Bernice started a scream, but her hand cut it off to a yip; and while the two of them were still vibrating, I took Bernice's arm, pushed the guy to one side and walked away.

That's all there was to it.

When Bernice and I got in my car, a gray Chrysler was parked not far behind it; and when I drove away, it followed. Bernice said:

"Do you have a cigarette?"

I gave her one, she lit it from the dash lighter, inhaled like she'd needed a smoke for a long time, and I said:

"My name is Pete Mavrey."

"Bernice Falknor."

"Who's the guy following us, Bernice?"

"Eldon Shelwaite."

"What was the fight about?"

"I told him we were washed up." She inhaled again, blew out smoke, looked at me, and suddenly smiled. As quick as that, she'd stopped being mad. The excitement was still in her, making her face lively and pretty and she said, "Next time I cut loose a boy friend, I'll do it closer to home."

"Where's home?"

"San Francisco."

"How are you going to get there?"

"You're going to loan me five dollars."

I looked at her, and she raised an eyebrow. "Aren't you?"

It turned out I was.

I also loaned her my almost new fleece-lined jacket that I paid fifty-five dollars for. Eldon Shelwaite followed us right into Santa Cruz, like he might pick up the fight as soon as I let her out, so I stopped at the north end of the City Hall where the police department was; and as soon as he saw the sign, he moved his Chrysler out of there in a hurry.

I stayed at the depot until her bus left, and he didn't show up again.

I didn't see her again for a month, and I'd already kissed the jacket and the five bucks goodby. Then I went home one Saturday afternoon and she was sitting in front of my place in a beat up old Plymouth, and her black eye was gone, and she was light and gay and apologetic; and she insisted she owed me a dinner for being so slow about returning the jacket; and that's all it took for me to call up Anna and tell her I didn't feel up to Papa's Saturday night this week, and for her to make some excuse for me.

It was fun that evening. Or maybe it was the relief from skipping Papa.

And afterwards I took Bernice to the motel where she was staying, thanked her for the feed, said good night without trying to kiss her, and that was that.

And about a month later, she showed up again.

Only she was down in the dumps this time. I gathered Eldon Shelwaite was giving her a bad time. No, she didn't want to talk about it. She wanted to get away from him for a couple of days, and she wanted to be cheered up. I missed another one of Papa's Saturday nights.

I told Anna about getting the jacket and the money back, but I didn't tell her about the dinner. I didn't tell her about the second time either.

Nor the third.

Nor the tenth.

Now, I know what you're thinking but you've got it wrong. Sure, she was pretty, she had this peculiar quality of aliveness at times that could get under your skin if you let it, but I didn't let it. Me, I had Anna. Besides, from the way Bernice acted at first, she wasn't making any play for me. She was using me for a safety valve. When her troubles got her down, she'd drop over to Santa Cruz for the week end, and we'd drive to Monterey or Carmel or San Mateo for dinner and a show or dance, or just the ride and nothing else; and sometime during the evening she'd lose that glumness she usually arrived with, and the evening would turn into fun.

The way I saw it, we were good for each other: I was having my troubles with Anna and Papa, and she was having hers with that screwball Shelwaite.

You understand, I never even tried to kiss her good night. But about the fifth—no, the sixth—time she showed up, everything changed.

She kissed me.

"That was just for good night, Pete." She looked at me a little anxiously.

"Sure."

"I like the way things are between us now. I wouldn't want to change a thing."

"Sure, I understand."

"Thank you Pete." She smiled and patted my hand. "I need you. Just the way you have been. I need you a lot."

And I drove away, and I told myself it was just for good night; but I could still feel it."

I could feel it right down to the soles of my feet.

After that, I kissed her good night after every evening, and some other times besides; and after about the tenth week end, I stopped kidding myself I was just being polite, or that Bernice wanted things just the way they had been.

She was stuck on me; and it was pretty plain I could change a friendship into something a lot bigger any time I wanted to. She was a mixed up kid with plenty of troubles, and I was the first guy who ever treated her like she was anything but wolf bait; and she'd fallen for me.

And she hadn't been kidding about that suppose-you-wanted-to-disappear question. Disappearance was her cockeyed answer to the El-

don Shelwaite problem. She figured I was a pretty smart guy; and when I made up that fantastic scheme to amuse her, she'd taken it for real.

All that, because I hadn't told her about Anna at the beginning.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it now. I was wearing out my front room rug and getting no place. The thing to do now was go fishing.

I went fishing.

All I caught was a stingray and a lot of kelp; and when I got back to my cabin, a gray Chrysler was parked in front of it.

I got out of my car and walked around it, and Eldon Shelwaite got out of his Chrysler. He had put on weight in the more than a year since I'd seen him, but at first glance he looked much the same. There was even the same sore look on his face. He got right to the point:

"Where were you last night?"

"What's that to you?"

"Were you with her?"

"With who?" I played it dumb.

"You know who, you sonova-bitch. Were you?"

"No."

"Where were you?"

I could see now he looked a little sick. There were dark pouches under his eyes and they were red like he might have been crying. Or maybe it was from the booze he was breathing in my face. He said:

"If you haven't got an alibi, I'm going to the police."

"With what?"

"With what I know about you and her."

"And what do you know?"

"I know plenty. I know all about her sneaking down here for week-end visits. You think I'm dumb? I know what was going on, and I've got detective reports to prove it."

I thought he was dumb, all right. And I knew how to shut him up in a hurry.

"And while you're telling the cops, tell them who was always hounding around after her, tell them who beat her up on at least one occasion I know of. They'll be interested in that." I poked a finger at the chest of his two hundred dollar gabardine. "You were the guy she was scared of, not me."

He looked kind of blank for a second, like he didn't know what I was talking about. "Where were you last night?"

I bent to get the key from under my mat, and when I stood up, I said, "Go to hell."

"By God, if you killed her—" He took a sock at me.

At least he thought it was a sock, but it was nothing but a sort of looping overhand that I blocked without half trying. I put the flat of my hand against his chest, and shoved, and he went off my front porch walking backwards. He stumbled and would have fallen except that his Chrysler caught him. I said:

"I didn't kill her. Now get out of

here before I call some cops and tell what I know."

A car had driven up while this went on, and now I looked at it. Anna was getting out of it, looking from me to the guy I'd pushed off my front porch. Eldon Shelwaite stood there a couple of seconds, a little white in the face, then he got into his Chrysler, and slammed it out of there. Anna came over.

"What was that all about?"

"Just a drunk. Looking for a fight."

"Who is he?"

"Some guy who wandered down this road by mistake." I couldn't bring myself to tell her who he was; although, if he actually did go to the cops, she was going to find out a lot of things, and every one of them was going to sound like something different from what it was. What a mess.

"Pete."

"Yes?"

"I didn't mean to quarrel with you this afternoon."

"You didn't quarrel with me. I just behaved like a cluck, that's all."

"If you still want to go to San Francisco, I'd like to."

I looked at her. And I thought about here she was making up to me like it was her who'd been wrong; and I said:

"What's Mama having tonight?"

"Chicken cacciatore."

"I don't want to miss that."

"You don't have to come just because—"

"Now, cut it out." I put an arm around her. "Your old man is all right, and so am I. We don't happen to think so right now, but if we keep working at it, we'll sooner or later have to admit it's a fact."

"Pete, that's a nice thing to say."

She had her face against my chest, and I could smell the clean dry flavor of her hair. It was a nice thing to say. It was fine. For a minute I almost believed it myself.

The next day, Sunday, a 55-year-old ex-seaman gave himself up to the San Francisco cops, and confessed the slaying of Bernice Falknor. Besides being an ex-seaman, he turned out to be an ex-inmate of the state hospital for the insane. What the papers called "a harmless crank." They turned him loose.

Monday, a woman's body was fished out of the bay. Acquaintances of Bernice Falknor viewed the body, and stated unanimously that it wasn't Bernice.

Tuesday, the police reported no progress. At least half a dozen leads had petered out. And Tuesday I got a letter in a plain envelope, postmarked Sacramento.

Dear Pete:

I have an address now—1423 Eltange Street, Sacramento. Apartment C.

I'm scared. I had no idea it would be like this. Can I talk to you? Could you get over here? Please, Pete?

Jessica Martingale

So she was scared, she'd had no idea it would be like this—good grief, what'd she thought it was going to be like? The answer was simple. She hadn't thought at all.

It was after six o'clock, I hadn't had dinner yet, I was pooped from a tough day at the shop; but I got in my car and drove a hundred and fifty miles to Sacramento.

1423 Eltange Street was a row of one-story apartments running back to the alley. Apartment C was dark, but radio music came out of it, so I punched the bell.

A barely visible shape showed up behind the screen door.

"Who is it?" Bernice's voice.

"Pete."

Then the screen door opened, and she came into my arms so hard I had to take a step back. She was kissing me, her body hot and taut against me, and I—well, I won't lie about it—I was kissing her back. When she was like that, you kissed her back whether you wanted to or not. Then I said:

"Come on. Let's get out of here."

"Where?"

"My car. We can't talk here."

"Wait until I get my shoes."

She'd done a better job of changing her looks than you'd have expected. Her hair was a sort of medium brown now, as short as it could be and still look like anything, and sort of carelessly put together. Her lipstick, even to me, was the wrong color for her, there was too little of it, and it was on crooked.

She couldn't hide the fact she was young and healthy; but the sleeveless green dress just sort of hung on her, and when you added the sag-shouldered way she stood to make herself look flat chested, and the perspiration on her face, and the gum she was chewing, she just missed being a bag.

In the car, she said, "How do you like it?"

"Like what?"

"The new identity."

"It's better than I thought you'd do."

She may have been scared when she wrote the note, but she wasn't now. She was wound up, she was excited, but she wasn't scared.

"Pete, I'm in trouble, aren't I?"

"You sure are."

"Could they put me—in jail?"

"They probably could."

"Why I didn't do anything—"

"You perpetrated a hoax that has already cost the taxpayers a pile of money. You've got cops chasing their tails all over the place. You've got the newspapers spreading it from coast to coast. A lot of people are going to be plenty sore when the cops catch up with you. They'll figure some way to take it out of your hide."

"But what could they charge me with?"

"Don't ask me, I'm no lawyer. All I know is they'll find something; and, flimsy or not, the judge'll figure you need a lesson, and he'll sock you the limit."

"Pete, I don't want to go to jail."

I didn't say anything. I know about jail, and I didn't want her to go either. But that didn't mean she wouldn't.

We were passing one of those little parks that are scattered over Sacramento, and I pulled the car to the curb. "Let's sit on the grass."

"That would be nice."

It was late, but there were still a few people in the park, so we wouldn't attract any attention. Besides it was pretty dark in there. We sat on the grass under a tree and it was cooler, and after a while, she said:

"How do you like my new name? Jessica Martingale."

"Phoney as a wax apple."

She laughed at that. "You're in a bad humor, aren't you, Pete?"

"Yes."

"Because I'm going to jail?"

"Because you ever started this crazy thing."

"It was exciting, Pete. Once I got started, everything went off like clockwork. I don't see where I made a single slip. And you said yourself that my new identity was a good one."

"And your friend Shelwaite visited me the other day."

That took some of the liveliness out of her. "What did he want?"

"He knew all about your trips to Santa Cruz. He had private detectives on your trail. He thinks I killed you and he says he's going to the cops with it."

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes. And if you think that won't hit the headlines, you're crazy. And my prison record isn't going to help the least little bit."

She thought about that a while, and said in a sudden, fierce voice, "Damn him! *Oh, damn him!*"

I didn't say anything, and it was maybe a half a minute before she spoke again: "And that will hurt your chances with your other—girl, won't it?"

"Who told you about her?"

"Nobody. I just knew. What is she like Pete?"

"I'm going to marry her."

For a moment she didn't speak, then she said, "Oh," and her voice had gone dull, all the excitement out of it. "Do you—want me to give myself up to the police?"

I thought about jail, and especially about how it would be for her, and I said:

"It's not for me to say."

"If you tell me to, I will."

"I'm not telling you anything."

"But you want me to, don't you?"

I didn't say anything.

"Then tell me to."

"No."

I could feel her looking at me in the darkness, and finally she said, "Then I won't go back."

That was that. I stood up.

Bernice stood up too. "I'm sorry, Pete."

I didn't say anything.

"They can't do anything to you until they find a body, can they?"

"No." Just smear my name from here to Hoboken.

"Then nothing really bad can happen to you. And if she—this girl—won't forgive you, she doesn't love you very much, does she?"

"Come on, I'll take you home."

Neither of us said anything until I stopped the car under some trees half a block from her apartment.

"You better walk it from here."

"All right." She didn't get out. "Aren't you going to kiss me good-bye?"

"There'll be no more of that."

She laughed—why, I don't know—something suddenly seemed to please her. "I told a fib back there in the park."

"So?"

"I'm not really sorry. About it hurting you with your other girl. If she breaks it up with you, you're free again, aren't you?"

"That's hardly the word for it."

"It's my word for it." She sat a moment, then said, "I'm not going to stay in Sacramento. It's too hot. I'm going to move to the coast."

"If you're smart, you'll make it the east coast."

"No, that's too far. Santa Barbara perhaps. I was there once and it was pretty. I'll let you know."

"I don't want to know."

"Maybe you will later." She took my hand, held it a moment against her cheek before I pulled it away. "I'll let you know."

I watched her walk away in that round-shouldered shuffle I suppose

she'd been practicing; and, whether I wanted it or not, my hand remembered the warm, alive feel of her cheek.

Wednesday, when I got home for work, there was a black Chevvie sedan parked in front of my place with a couple of men sitting in it. I got out, and they got out, and before anybody said a word, I knew who they were. I knew cops. I knew them better than I wanted.

These were the new style cops, the ones with manners.

"Pete Mavrey?"

"That's right."

"My name is Wykehorn. This is my partner, Klenahan. Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office." They showed me the identification, then:

"Do you know a Bernice Falknor?"

"Yes."

"When did you last see her?"

"About three weeks ago." That was the first lie. I had officially gone out on a limb for her now.

"Suppose you tell us about it."

"Sure, come on in the house."

We went in and sat down and lit up, and I told them what I knew about Bernice Falknor from the afternoon down by the Pigeon Point Lighthouse right up to three weeks ago, and you can bet I didn't spare Eldon Shelwaite in the telling. I stopped talking the sentence before Bernice asked me, "Suppose you wanted to disappear."

Wykehorn was a tall, lean guy with iron-gray hair and a big anvil

of a jaw; and Klenahan was red-headed, freckled, and young enough to be his son. Wykehorn did the talking. I was playing it friendly, and they were playing it polite, but nobody was fooled. I wasn't sweating just because it was a hot day, and they hadn't made the long drive down from Martinez just for their health. The way they saw it, a woman had been killed, and I could be the guy who had killed her.

"So you haven't seen her for three weeks?"

"That's right."

"You knew she was missing?"

"I saw it in the papers."

"Why didn't you tell the authorities what you knew about her and this Eldon Shelwaite?"

"I was thinking about doing that. At first I figured you'd probably turn him up without any help from me. I didn't want to get mixed up in the thing unless I had to."

"Because of your record?"

So they had that too. I guess I hadn't expected anything else. I said, "Yes."

"We understand you served time for killing a man. Want to tell us about it?"

They knew all about that already. What they wanted was to make me tell it. They were ready to put the pressure on now, and this was the first turn of the screw.

"It happened about six years ago on New Year's Eve in a desert town—"

"What town?"

As if they didn't know. "Kingistan, Arizona."

"Go on."

"I only stopped there overnight on the way to the coast, and it being New Year's and all, I made a few bars—"

"You were drunk?"

"Yes, I was."

"Go on."

"I didn't even know the guy, he was just another drunk. Only he was fighting drunk. I happened to jiggle his arm when he was taking a drink, and he spilled some of his shot, and for that he cussed me out. Then he socked me on the mouth, and it hurt, and I socked him back."

"Socked him where?"

"On the jaw." I was sweating hard, just thinking about it.

"What happened then?"

"I guess I knocked him out. But if he'd fallen against a table, or if somebody had caught him, it would have been just another one of those two-punch saloon arguments. But nobody caught this guy but the corner of a brick wall. And he was dead before the doctor got there."

"That sounds like an accident."

"Hell, it was an accident. I never saw the guy before in my life. I had no cause to want to kill him."

"What happened next?"

"It turned out the guy was a big wheel locally. Lots of family, lots of money. All the witnesses were more than half drunk, and I was a stranger in town; and by the time a few highpowered lawyers got through

telling these fuzzy witnesses what they saw, it was no accident. His family tried to make it first degree murder. They couldn't make that stick, and without all that money, they couldn't have made anything stick; but what little they did make stick netted me two years at Florence, and a year in Phoenix on parole."

"A pretty expensive punch."

"You're telling me."

"Where do you work, Mr. Mavrey?"

"Jordoe Tool Company. In San Jose."

"What do you do?"

"I'm a tool and die maker."

"That's a good line."

"I like it."

"Now, there are a couple of points in your story about Bernice Falknor we'd like you to clear up."

It wasn't just a couple of points, it was the whole story. Twice. Three times, picking it apart, cross checking; it was every minute of my time for the past week. It was about Anna and who were my friends. Then it was the story again. It was all just plain hell.

"Do you mind if Klenahan and I look around your house a little?"

"No, I don't mind."

If you've never seen a couple of professionals "look around" a house, you've got something coming to you. They did everything but pry the shingles off the roof. They found a steel rule I'd lost a year ago, six bits in money, and a mouse's nest

with three mice in it in the attic. They asked a question for everything they looked at; and about a quarter of nine Wykehorn asked:

"Did Bernice Falknor talk much about Eldon Shelwaite?"

"Was it him sicced you onto me?"

"No. The tip was anonymous."

"I see. No, she didn't talk much about him. He was in the real estate game, she said. Promoting big tracts of housing. He didn't put up the money, he just promoted the deals—lined up the guys with the money, the guys with the land, and the buys to contract the houses. He handled a lot of money; and according to Bernice, he got his share and then some."

About fifteen minutes more of questions, then Wykehorn said, "I guess that's all." He stuck out his hand. "Thanks Mr. Mavrey, you've been very cooperative."

Cops, new style. I shook his hand. "Glad to help."

"Sorry to put you to so much trouble."

"It's your job. Look, I don't suppose all this can be kept out of the papers?"

He gave me a you-know-how-it-is smile, and shook his head.

"I didn't think so."

For a second, watching them go out my front door, I felt almost good. By God, I'd sold them. They were going to give Eldon Shelwaite a rough time, but I didn't care about him. The way I figured, a rough time was what that guy rated. Then

I thought about the newspapers and about Anna, and I didn't feel good any more.

I took a shower, put on fresh clothes, and drove down to Anna's place. The black Chevvie sedan was parked in front of her place now. I drove past without stopping.

Cops. They check everything. I went home.

Either Anna would call me or she wouldn't.

She didn't.

The papers had it by noon the next day. And they had it wrong. They had it—in that roundabout way they use to dodge the libel suits—that Bernice had been living with Eldon Shelwaite right along for the last year and a half. They mentioned me, because the tip had been about me and they rated me a sort of second string boy friend, but the real news was Shelwaite. He'd been picked up for questioning last night, and he was still being held. He'd probably acted screwy enough to make them suspicious.

Bernice was getting her revenge on him.

There was no telling where the thing would end. As Bernice had said, the police couldn't actually arrest anybody until they had either a body or a confession; but they could sure make a lot of trouble for everybody concerned, including me.

I could turn her in, and the pressure would be off, but I still wouldn't be square with Anna. And I

couldn't be too sure I'd be square with the cops either. I'd lied plenty to them. But mostly I guess I couldn't turn her in, because she'd go to jail. If the cops found her and sent her there, that was one thing; but me sending her there was something else. I couldn't do it.

Just before quitting time, the word was passed back in the shop that somebody out front wanted to see me as soon as I was off work. Then the whistle blew, I went up front, and a man was waiting there for me.

He was a sort of medium guy in his forties, wearing a suit that could have been pressed better, but was a long way from being crummy. His face was ordinary, nothing you'd notice in a crowd; and his voice, like the cops yesterday, was polite. That's what I figured him for—a cop or a reporter.

"Pete Mavery?"

"That's right."

"Maybe we could talk better outside in the car. Oh, my name is Otto Greck."

"Police?"

"No."

"Reporter?"

"No." He was leading the way outside.

Outside was a gray Cadillac convertible with the top up, and sitting in it a woman with red hair. Closer, you could see red wasn't the real color of her hair—that shade of red wouldn't be the color of any woman's hair—but that didn't mean it

wasn't all right. Her face was all right too, until you got right up to it, and saw how carefully it was made up, and how it changed so little when she talked that you wondered if it was a mask or something. Otto Greck introduced her:

"Mrs. Eldon Shelwaite."

"Hello." So he had a wife.

"How do you do?" Her voice was a little scratchy, not a very pleasant voice, but maybe she wasn't trying to make it pleasant. "Get in. I want to talk to you."

"About what?"

"Get in."

Greck opened the door, and we got in, him between Mrs. Shelwaite and me in the front seat. He said:

"Mrs. Shelwaite is divorcing her husband."

Just what I needed—to get mixed up in a divorce suit. I reached for the door handle.

"Wait a second."

I waited, but mostly because he had a good grip on my arm.

"How much a month do you make in that tool works?"

"Let go my arm, chum."

"How would you like to make a month's salary at one crack?"

"Doing what?"

"Telling us some of the things Bernice Falknor said about Eldon Shelwaite."

"Such as?"

"Where he kept his money."

"How would she know that?"

"She was living with him. And before that she worked for him."

"The living with him part was just in the newspapers."

"Stop kidding," Mrs. Shelwaite said in her scratchy voice. "We know she was living with him."

"How?"

Otto Greck smiled a little, and I knew then what it was about him I didn't like. With that smile, he looked like half the pimps in the world. He said:

"The same way we know she was playing around with you."

I just looked at him, and he said:

"I'm the detective he hired to track her to you."

"What are you doing working against him now?"

Greck shrugged. "The Falknor dame was knocked off. I was out of a job. Then I thought Mrs. Shelwaite might be interested in what Shelwaite had been getting away with."

"So you made up a story about him and Bernice, and sold it to her."

Mrs. Shelwaite looked suddenly and sharply at the detective; and he wiped the smile off his face, and said:

"I made up nothing. That Falknor dame had him wrapped around her little finger. She treated him the only way you can to impress a guy like that—like he was dirt, like she didn't give a whoop if she never saw him again. She drove him crazy. They'd have a fight and she'd walk out on him just like that; and when he couldn't stand it any more, he'd have me hunt her up, and it'd

cost him plenty to get her back. He was keeping her in that extra apartment up on Telegraph Hill that nobody knew anything about. She wasn't the first he'd kept there, but after she arrived, brother, that was the end of the others. She had him taped, tied, and hypnotized." He gave me the soft pimp's smile. Just like she had you, chum."

He wasn't batting a hundred percent—not the part about me, anyway—but the rest of it had the ring of truth. So the papers had had it right after all. It took the wind out of me a little.

Mrs. Shelwaite's mask cracked a spasm of anger, and straightened again. The scratchy voice said:

"He was putting money away. I know that. I wasn't in his confidence any more, but I know the way he works. Always the same. On a big job like this where four or five millions are involved, he'd have at least a hundred thousand chiselled off and socked away."

"You see," Otto Greck said, "we want to find that money so it'll be available for alimony."

I looked at them, that sweet smelling pair—the hard faced dame and the soft-smiling detective—and I'd had enough. I opened the door, and I got out, and this time Greck was pulled half out of the car with me before he let go. Walking away, I heard Mrs. Shelwaite's scratchy voice:

"Otto, you're a damn fool. I told you it wouldn't work."

I thought about Bernice Falknor and Eldon Shelwaite, and it was hard to say how I felt. Sort of betrayed, I guess, if that means anything to you.

I wasn't judging her. God knows I'm no saint; it wasn't my business to judge anybody. Besides, it happens all the time. You say they do it for the money, but there's more to it than that. Bernice had told me a little of her early life; and it, too, was something that happens all the time—kids growing up with their parents not giving a damn about them, and the rest of the world sure not caring if they even eat or not. A lot of mixed up people come out of that background. Security is what they're looking for. And love. But they keep getting it confused with money.

And I thought now that I understood what had been behind Bernice's elaborate, incredible scheme to disappear. Like the detective had said, she'd tried to walk out on Shelwaite before, but always his money brought her back. If she were dead, Shelwaite would stop looking for her. And this way, if she were to weaken and want to come back to the money of her own accord, there was the prospect of jail to stop her.

The way she saw it, she had straightened out her life. But she'd sure messed up a lot of other lives. Shelwaite's. Mine. Anna's. Anna . . . don't think about her. Put her out of your mind.

As if I could.

I stopped in Felton and bought a big steak on the theory I'd cook a big dinner to buck myself up. Then I drove up the canyon to my cabin, deep in shade, even at six o'clock. I wasn't at all prepared for the car that was parked there.

Anna's.

She didn't come to meet me. She stood there on the porch while I got out of the car, came up the walk, climbed the two steps, and stopped a couple of feet from her.

There was an odd look on her face—not really odd, but one I'd never seen there before—as if she were seeing me in a suddenly different light. At least that's the thing that occurred to me at the time. We stood like that a few seconds, and she didn't say anything, just looked at me that way; and I knew it was time for me to start talking.

I told it in one long rush, not sparing myself, not telling it a fraction different from the way it happened, nor trying to hide anything she might see in my face; and I ended it exactly where I had with the cops—just before the suppose-you-wanted-to-disappear line. I wasn't holding that back to spare myself; it was because if I told her that part and she didn't tell the police, she'd be a party to the hoax too. And I didn't want that.

I finished and stood there, still not knowing what was going to happen to me. She said:

"You didn't have to tell me, Pete."

"It happened just the way I said."

"Yes. I've been wrong. For a long time."

"I'm the joker that's been wrong."

"No. I've been trying so hard to make it easier for Papa, that I . . . I forgot I might lose you. Let's get married, Pete. Soon."

Maybe you'd say things got mushy after that; but it was the kind of mush you carry around in your memory the rest of your life, and smile in your sleep when you dream about it.

But we finally got down to plans.

I was going to take a day off tomorrow, even if she couldn't, because she would have to start breaking in a new teller for the bank; but she'd take long enough for us to go over and take out a license. After that we'd get married as soon as she had her clothes ready, and the new teller was solid—ten days with luck two weeks at the outside. We'd do it big—church and reception and all—because Papa and Mama would want it that way.

That's as far as we got. I was all for making a big night out of tonight, but she said she had a lot of things to do, now that it was all settled, besides:

"Papa is being difficult." Her smile was shy. "You see, I told him this afternoon about us being married right away."

You think that didn't make me feel good? She'd taken all that guff

from the cops last night, and all the slop the newspapers had dished out today, and she was still my girl, still wanted to marry me even before she heard my side of it.

I stood there with my arms around her, my throat so full I couldn't have said anything if I tried. It was like being in church.

After she was gone, I cleaned up, and I cooked the steak, even if I was too excited to eat much of it. And in the middle of dinner I got a phone call. A woman's voice:

"Pete?"

"Yes."

"It's Jessica."

Bernice. She was disguising her voice a little, which was why I hadn't recognized it at the first word. I didn't think the cops would have tapped my wire, but it still hadn't been smart for her to call me. She was saying:

"I want to see you, Pete."

"I can't come all the way to—"

"I'm in Capitola."

Good grief, Capitola was only a few miles down the coast from Santa Cruz. "Are you crazy?"

"I'm at the Seavrene Motel, just off the beach. You can't miss it. My room is number six."

"Listen, Jessica, I'm going to be married."

That stopped her. Finally she let out a little sigh. "That sort of puts an end to things, doesn't it?"

"Yes. It's goodbye, kid. And good luck."

More silence. Then: "Good luck to you, Pete. And her."

I didn't sleep very well that night, but at least I didn't dream about prison. I dreamed about Papa, which was almost as bad.

Next morning we applied for the marriage license before Anna went to work. She looked so fussed and pretty I wanted to take her in my arms right there. Later, as she was getting out in front of the bank, she said that Papa wasn't feeling too well. He was taking things very hard. Much harder than she'd feared. We agreed it might be a good idea if I stayed away from the house that night.

Which left me with a whole day to myself. By evening, I was so restless, so tied up inside, that I had to do something, anything, just to get away from town for a while—away from myself.

So I went for a drive.

When I finally snapped out of it. I was way up the Salinas Valley, almost to Paso Robles. I'd driven nearly a hundred and fifty miles, and it was after midnight, but I felt fine.

It was going on four o'clock when I headed up the canyon to my place.

The lights were on. I hadn't left them on, but they were on now. And Eldon Shelwaite's gray Chrysler was in my driveway.

I parked and crossed to the door and opened it, and for a second I didn't see anybody in the room.

Then I looked at the floor, and it was like my heart stopped beating.

Eldon Shelwaite.

With a hole in his face where the bridge of his nose ought to be. And the rest of his face black-freckled and smoked from powder burns. There was a lot of blood soaked into the carpet. It looked black. I could smell it.

The room looked like it had been searched—not a neat, cop search like day before yesterday—a messy search. Cushions pulled out of chairs, magazines yanked off shelves, books on the floor, radio turned half around. Who? Looking for what?

I walked through the rest of the house, and all of it had been searched—drawers open, mattress half on the floor, stuff scattered all over the place, one hell of a mess. But why?

I looked good, but there was no gun anywhere in the place.

Call the cops.

I looked at the phone, but I couldn't make myself touch it. I went into the living room. I sat in a chair and lit a cigarette, and this time my hand was steady. Oh, I was still sick and still scared, but by now it had settled like a cold lump of lead in my belly.

Brother, you're jammed. You're jammed bad.

He's dead, and in your house, and you've got no alibi at all. Maybe the killer left clues, and maybe he didn't. Maybe the cops will find

them, and maybe they won't. One thing sure—you're going to jail. You've got no alibi, no explanation, no nothing. Just a record. Six years ago you killed a man; and now no cop, no judge, no jury, nor anybody else is going to believe you didn't kill another one here tonight.

My portable typewriter had been taken out of the closet and opened up. There was a crumpled ball of paper in the corner; I picked it up, smoothed it out, and there was typing on it:

Eldie, chum, you may as well forget about the money . . .

That was all. One line, an incomplete sentence, no period. It had been written on my typewriter; I recognized the chipped "E" and the "a" below the line, the "u" above.

I went back to Eldon Shelwaite's body and started going through his pockets. The usual stuff: keys, coins, handkerchief. Wallet with a hundred and ninety bucks in it, which meant it wasn't robbery. And in an inside coat pocket:

Eldie, chum, you may as well forget the money because you'll never see it again. But don't grieve too much because it really wasn't yours, you know. I'm sure you won't make the mistake of going to the police, because your associates might become very interested in how you milked this \$107,000 out of them. Know what I mean?

Written on a typewriter. But not mine.

I was beginning to get the meaning of what it said.

Eldon Shelwaite had chiselled \$107,000 out of the tracts he'd been promoting, and now it had been stolen from him. And I remembered yesterday how his wife and that detective had been at me about where Eldon kept his money. Had they found out? Had they taken it, and left this unsigned note to point out he couldn't go to the police about it? Had they shot him?

I thought about it, and the shooting made no sense. They didn't have to. He couldn't do anything to them, couldn't call in the cops. They had the money, and that was that.

Or did they have it?

Eldon Shelwaite must have typed that line on my typewriter to compare with the original note. His checking me at all meant he hadn't been sure who took his money. He had been checking the same thing as his wife and the detective—the idea that maybe Bernice had told me where he kept his money.

He thought maybe I had taken it.

That part made a little sense. And it explained why my place had been searched. Shelwaite had been released by the cops, had come down to my place. I wasn't at home, but he'd seen me take the key from under the mat the other day. He took it out, opened up, and searched my place. Then the killer showed up,

must have knocked—for Shelwaite's body was in front of the door, as if he'd been answering it—and shot him squarely in the face.

But who?

And why?

I read the note again. All this note was going to mean to the cops was that I had stolen Shelwaite's \$107,000; and then when he showed up at my place to recover it, we had a fight and I shot him.

I sat down and lit a cigarette and stared at what was left of Eldon Shelwaite without seeing it at all. I took everything I knew and twisted it into every shape I could imagine, and put it together every way I could dream up, and the answer was always the same. There was only one thing I could do, and just thinking about that made me sick.

But I had no choice.

I packed a bag, turned off the lights, pulled the shades, and went out. I still had Shelwaite's keys. I opened the garage, ran his Chrysler into it, locked it, and put the key in my pocket.

Then I got into my own car and drove away.

The Seavrene Motel was just off the beach in Capitola. It was green stucco, nearly new, and there were twelve units, with a garage between each unit. At six o'clock it was pretty quiet. I parked my Ford where it would look like I was just an early bird down to look at the water, and settled down to wait.

The shades were down in unit number six, and there was a last year's model Plymouth parked in its garage. An hour went by, and then another. At eight-thirty the shades went up in number six, and about fifteen minutes later Bernice came out, wearing a dowdy green skirt and wrinkled white blouse.

I started my Ford, drove past her and beeped the horn, and in another moment she was on the seat beside me.

"Petel You came to say goodbye after all."

"Not exactly." I drove on for a few yards and turned off to park on a side road.

"Then what for?"

"I want to talk to you."

"What about?"

"About Eldon Shelwaite. He's been murdered."

"You—you're joking." But the soft, shocked tone of her voice said she knew I wasn't.

"He's lying in my front room with a hole through his head, front to back."

She didn't speak. She just sat there and stared at me, the color gradually coming back to her face. I told her the rest of it, and showed her the note. She read it, looked up, and her face was puzzled now.

"What are you going to do?"

"What do you think?"

"Run?"

"Yes." I took back the note. "As soon as I check a couple of things."

"Where will we go?"

"Not we, baby."

"It's got to be we. Who else will dye your hair, drive the car while you hide in the back, buy food, get you a thousand miles away, and rent a place for you to hide until the search dies down?"

She wasn't kidding. If I had a chance, that was it. I said, "Cut it out. I'm already in trouble. A little more won't hurt."

"Your other troubles are peanuts compared to this."

She could say that again. I said:

"All I want from you is information."

"About what?"

"For the last year and a half you had been living with Shelwaite, hadn't you?"

"I wasn't really living with him—just from time to time."

"Where did he keep the money he chiselled out of his promotion schemes?"

"I was his secretary, and I was in love with him, and he swore he was going to divorce his wife and marry me. He was lying, but I—"

"Look, I don't want the story of your life. Where did he keep all that money?"

"Please, Pete." Her face had a pinched, hurt look. "I want you to understand. Every time I went back to him, it was worse than the last time—I would be sicker, and more ashamed; until finally I knew I'd have to get away permanently, disappear, or I was going to end up jumping off the bridge. So I—"

She was going to start crying in a minute. I could see it in her face. And there wasn't time for it. I said:

"I understand, kid. Nobody's blaming you. We've all got a few mistakes coming to us. Yours was falling for a smooth talking, free-spending, no-good guy. You made a mistake and you paid for it. Just like I did over in Arizona. No sense to go through life looking back at it."

I felt like a preacher, dishing out that stuff; but I knew it was what she wanted to hear.

She looked at me doubtfully, and I pulled as much of a grin as I had left in me, and said:

"Stop holding up the parade, and give with some information."

She brought up a little piece of smile to match my grin, and the alive look was coming back to her face.

"What do you want to know?"

"Where did he keep all the money that note talks about?"

"I don't know."

"Any ideas?"

"Well, there was a wall safe in his apartment."

"Who else knew about the safe?"

"I don't know. Oh, yes, there was the detective."

"Otto Greck?"

"No, his name was Jones or Johnson or something. Eldon wanted a divorce. He had his detective shadowing his wife to see if she had any boy friends."

"Did she?"

"Eldon said not."

I thought about Mrs. Shelwaite, and wondered. I said:

"Anybody else know about the safe?"

"I don't know. Pete, you do understand why I took such a crazy way of disappearing, don't you?"

So I was back to understanding her. I said, "I guess so."

"I wanted to fix it so I couldn't go back—even if I weakened."

"You fixed it."

"I'm sorry. About you, I mean. There isn't any way to tell you how sorry I am."

She was sorry. I looked at her. Being sorry helped a lot, didn't it? I didn't say anything.

"Don't look at me—that way."

"How am I supposed to look?"

"Please, Pete." Her face was twisting like she might cry after all, and I didn't want that. I patted her hand.

"Spilled milk. Forget it."

"And you will let me help you get away?"

"We'll see."

She took that for yes, and her face relaxed, went pleased, like I'd done something nice for her. "Why don't we start this minute?"

"I want to check that note first."

"Check what about it?"

"Check who wrote it."

"How can you do that?"

"The same way Shelwaite was doing—look for the typewriter that wrote it. His murder is tied up with that hundred grand some way. If I find who wrote the note, I have a

hunch I might find a murderer at the same time."

"Won't the police check the note if you, say, mail it to them?"

"Probably, but I can't be sure. If I run, they may just decide I wrote it. If I stay and turn in the note personally, they'd check it; but if it came to nothing, I'd be sunk. I'd already be in jail."

Bernice nodded thoughtfully. "But where will you start?"

"The wife and the detective will do to start. You used to work for him. Was there anybody he took into his confidence? Any of his associates? An accountant, maybe?"

"He didn't trust anybody. Here, let me see the note again."

I handed it to her.

"It wasn't written on any of the office machines. They were all the new electric kind, with the sort of type you see in books."

"That leaves just the wife and the detective," I said. "Which means that I'll need the address of Shelwaite's apartment. Also the address of his wife."

"Can't I go with you?"

"No. Disguised or not, you don't want to show your face in San Francisco."

Bernice took an address book from her purse. "They're both in here."

I put the book in my pocket. "While I'm gone, have your car lubricated, fill it up with gas. Get some dark glasses, buy a blanket, the dye or whatever you need to change

the color of my hair, and some bandage and adhesive tape."

"What for?"

"We may need it to partially hide my face. Buy a blanket, if you don't already have one. Get some road maps, and figure a route to New Orleans that doesn't go through Arizona?"

"Because I may have to ride on the floor under a blanket until we're a couple of states away. Arizona stops you for an agricultural inspection at the border, and they might spot me."

"That's smart." Bernice looked at me, excitement stirring in her face now. "You know, I bet we make it."

"You're damn right we'll make it."

"A new start. For us both."

"That's what." Whistling in the dark. And I was already discounting any result from the trip to San Francisco.

But I had to go.

I stopped at a pay phone on the edge of Santa Cruz, and phoned my house. It rang six times and nobody answered. No cops yet.

I wasn't much worried about Shelwaite's body being found right away. My place was locked up, and his car was out of sight. His friends or his wife might miss him in a day or so, might even call the cops, but it'd take the cops a while to check as far as me. They might not even check me at all. With luck I might

have a week. After that anybody with a nose, standing downwind was going to know there was something dead in there.

I crossed the mountains to San Mateo, still laying out my plans; and there I phoned the shop, told them I was being married, and was taking a two weeks' vacation, starting today. They didn't like such short notice, but I had the time coming, so I made it stick. Then I phoned Anna.

"Hello?"

"It's Pete."

"Good morning, hubby. Or is it bad luck to talk like that before the wedding?"

"I don't know. "How—how is Papa?"

"In bed." The smile went out of her voice. "I'm afraid he's really sick. We want to call a doctor, but he won't have it."

Good old Papa. He wasn't sick. But he figured if he could sell Anna on the idea, we'd have to postpone the wedding. He wouldn't be sick long.

"I've got kind of bad news, Anna."

"Yes?"

"The company is flying me down to L. A. for a dew days. An outfit down there is having trouble with a string of jigs we built for them. They want me to go down and straighten them out."

"Will it take you long?"

"Not more than a week." Not more than the rest of my life. I tried

to sound cheerful: "Will you miss me?"

"I miss you already."

I tried to say it lightly like her: "Me too."

"Anyway, it will give me time to work on my trousseau."

"Sure."

"Will I see you before you go?"

"I'm afraid not. The plane leaves right away."

"Oh."

"And, say, I'll be pretty busy down there. I may not have time to write."

"You rat." The smile was back in her voice. "You better write."

"I'll try."

"You'd better try hard."

My laugh wasn't much, but maybe she'd blame it on the connection.

"Got to go now. 'Bye."

"Goodbye, Pete." The sound of a kiss.

I hung up quick. I sat there in the telephone booth, and for the first time since I was a kid, I wanted to cry. It was all tied up now. Shelwaite was where they wouldn't find him for a while. I was accounted for at the shop, and I was accounted for with Anna. For at least a week nobody would be looking for me, and by that time I'd probably be in New Orleans.

I got into my car, and headed for San Francisco.

Shelwaite's apartment was on the fourth floor of a five story apartment house, well up on Telegraph Hill.

I rode up in a little automatic elevator, then walked along a short corridor to 4-C. I rang the bell, waited, rang twice more, then took out Shelwaite's keys. The second key let me in.

Pretty nice.

Even to my inexperienced eye, the furnishings spelled interior decorator, and a good one.

I got to the den last, and that's where the safe was. Open. It was a little wall job, about waist high, and had been masked by some books which now lay scattered on the floor.

He'd left without even closing the safe again. I moved closer now. There were some envelopes. I took them out.

One held insurance on his car and furniture, and a list of stocks he owned—over a hundred grand in all. Another had some lists of contractors and subcontractors, a sum of money beside each name. The third held four typewritten reports from the Otto Greck Detective Agency, subject: Bernice Falknor. The reports were straight, even about me only kissing her goodnight and never going into her motel with her.

A fourth envelope held seven reports from Otto Greck, subject: Mrs. Jewel Shelwaite. She had been a good girl.

The last envelope was the snapper. Five reports from the Jownstone Investigation Service, subject: Mrs. Jewel Shelwaite. She hadn't

been a good girl at all. In fact, she'd been a pretty bad girl. She had a boy friend, and his name was Otto Greck.

Cross and double cross.

It wasn't hard to figure. Shelwaite had put Greck on his wife's trail, and Greck saw a chance for two fees. Mrs. Shelwaite had probably been only too glad to pay Otto Greck for a clean bill of health—maybe for the lowdown on Shelwaite to boot. Besides that, she'd taken a shine to the rat. Some deal—Greck in the middle with it snowing money from two directions, and maybe a good chance of marrying Jewel and getting the alimony after she divorced her husband.

It took a brother rat like Shelwaite to be suspicious enough to run a double check on his wife.

But it was more than that. It was a motive for somebody to kill Shelwaite—the first I'd found—and I was starting to get excited.

Suppose Shelwaite had told his wife and Greck that he knew all about them. They saw all that alimony gone glimmering; so one or the other—Greck would be my choice—got into the safe and cleaned out the cash. Shelwaite, discovering his dough gone, headed for my place, with Greck on his trail to see what he was going to do. I was gone, Shelwaite searched my place, and suddenly Greck saw a chance to clear Shelwaite out of his path entirely, marry Jewel Shelwaite, and cut himself in on the rest of the

money—the stocks and all the legitimate money. Shelwaite had.

And leave me holding the sack.

So far it was neat, everything fitted, and I was getting plenty excited; then the fact I'd been overlooking hit me. I was reading Jownstone's reports. I was holding them right there in my hand, and that was all wrong.

Greck would have looked at everything in the safe. He'd have seen those reports, and he'd left them here, because even if he destroyed them, they still couldn't be erased from Jownstone's memory. And he'd never in the world have killed Shelwaite with a plain motive like that staring the cops in the face. Steal the money, yes. But kill Shelwaite, no.

How about Jewel Shelwaite? She was no brain—falling for Greck proved that. But murder? You could never tell. But I wasn't excited any more.

In the closet of the den I found a portable typewriter. The type didn't match the note.

Neither did Otto Greck's reports. Nor Jownstone's.

Then the phone rang, and I jumped about a foot. It rang three or four times, I put Jownstone's reports in my pocket, then on an impulse I should have resisted, I picked it up.

"Mr. Shelwaite?" A man's voice vaguely familiar.

"No."

"Who is this talking?"

"My name is Sam Jones. I clean up the place."

"Will you take a message for him?" Who was that guy?

"I guess so."

"Tell him to call Sergeant Wykehorn, Contra Costa County Sheriff's Office. Got that?"

"Sure." I could feel the hair rising on the back of my neck.

"Be sure he gets the message."

"All right."

He hung up and I put the phone down like it was made of glass. The cops wanted to talk to Shelwaite. That was bad. He wouldn't phone back, and they'd start looking for him.

And something else occurred to me: suppose the cops wanted to talk to Pete Mavrey again? I'd fixed it up with the shop and with Anna so I wouldn't be missed too soon, but I hadn't fixed anything with the cops.

I was starting to sweat.

I locked up and got out of there in a hurry.

I drove half way across town, arguing with myself about going to see Mrs. Jewel Shelwaite or not. I was jumpy as a cat, and I was starting to flinch every time I saw a black and white automobile.

I finally made a deal with myself.

I went to a pay phone, and put in a long distance call to my house. Nobody answered. All right, I'd go ahead to Mrs. Shelwaite's.

Her apartment house was six

stories taller than the hideout over on Telegraph Hill.

Mrs. Shelwaite was dressed for the street, and she said in her scratchy voice:

"What do you want?"

"To talk to you."

"I was just going out. I have an appointment."

"Do you have a typewriter?" I said abruptly.

She jumped, or rather her face did, a little spasm of surprise cracking the mask. "You too!"

"Me too?"

Her eyes narrowed, the mask smoothed out hard, and her lips barely moved as she said, "What's the big idea?"

As if I knew. "Do you have a typewriter?"

"Yes."

"Could I see it?"

"What for?"

"I want to type something on it."

Her eyes were half shut. "Type what?"

"This." I handed her the note, and she read it.

She was having a bad time with the mask. It slipped again, and this time it slipped bad. "Why—why—where'd you get this?"

"You recognize it?"

"Eldie—Eldie was here with it yesterday." Eldie, like in the note.

"Did you give him his hundred and seven thousand?"

There was no mask now. Just a sore dame with a file edge on her voice: "You know who got that

money, damn you. I told Eldie and I'm telling you. You're not getting away with it. If Eldie won't call the cops, I will!"

If it was acting, it was good. And calling the cops didn't fit at all—unless she was acting. I said:

"Eldie is in plenty of trouble with the cops already."

She stared stonily at me a while, then her eyes opened wide like a big idea struck her. "By God," she said softly, "you must have killed Bernice Falknor."

"Don't be a dope."

"She would have told you about Eldie's dough. But maybe she wouldn't go for robbing him. You had a fight about it, and you killed her. Then you robbed Eldie."

Of all the bird brains. "Then what would I be doing here, checking this note?"

"It's some trick—" The eyes opened wider, like she'd really had an idea this time. "I—I'll get the typewriter." She turned to an antique desk, and opened a drawer. I should have noticed the drawer wasn't big enough to hold a typewriter, but it took a couple of seconds for that to go through; and by that time she'd faced me again and I was past noticing anything but the gun in her hand."

"Stay where you are," she said in a voice like a worn-out record. "I'm going to call the police."

I stayed where I was.

It was a small gun, a .22 or at most a .25—not nearly big enough to blast

out that hole in Shelwaite's head. With any luck I could soak up two or three slugs from a peashooter like that, and still live; but I wouldn't do much travelling for a while.

She looked at me, and she felt good. "You know, I don't *have* to call the police."

"Then don't."

"We could make a deal."

"Such as?"

"Return the money. To me."

"I haven't got the money."

"I'd let you keep a little. Say, a thousand."

"Say nothing, I haven't got it."

"Five thousand?"

"I told you—"

"Ten?"

"If the deal was ninety, I still couldn't take it. I don't have the money."

She smiled. The way a cat smiles at her dinner. "Never mind. I just wanted to see how much you'd hold out for. You see, I can get it all. In alimony. After the cops sweat it out of you."

"Wait a minute."

She waited, her finger on the dial.

"Before you call the cops, take a look at these." I took Jownstone's reports from my pocket.

She looked at me calculatingly, and shook her head. "Nuh-uh. Some trick."

"Then listen." I read her about half of the first one, and she caught on.

"Why, that filthy, stinking—" She laid it on for a full minute, dir-

ty cussing, the kind it takes a dame to do right. She stopped, panting hard, her face gone hard and bony. "Give me those."

"What good will it do!" I walked over to her. "Jownstone still has his copies."

She was so mad she was shivering. "All right." She hissed it through her teeth. "All right. But I'll fix you, mister." She picked up the phone.

Turning me in wouldn't do her any good. She was just crazy mad, and had to turn it loose on somebody. I said quickly:

"Suppose we split the dough fifty-fifty?"

She was mad, but not that mad. She put the phone down.

"Where is it?"

"I'll take you to it."

"Nothing doing. You killed one woman already. Tell me where it is."

"Then you'd take it all."

"No, I wouldn't."

"We'll go together." It seemed like I hadn't stopped sweating for a minute since I found Selwaite's body. "You can trust me."

"I wouldn't trust you with a plugged nickel. Either you tell me, or I call the cops."

I was close enough now. "All right. Hand me that pencil and paper. I'll have to draw a map, or you'd never find it."

She reached for the pencil and paper.

I chopped at the wrist that held the gun—a jiu-jitsu chop, with ev-

erything I had in it. God knows why it didn't break her wrist, I hit it hard enough. The gun popped out of her hand, she opened her mouth to scream, and I hit her.

I never hit a woman before in my life, but I hit this one. But, scared as I was, and desperate as I was, I still remembered that guy in the saloon; and at the last instant I pulled the punch a little.

She fell, and I caught her.

She wasn't quite out, but she was so near it she didn't know where she was nor what had happened. I worked fast. I shoved the handkerchief from my breast pocket into her mouth, and tied it there with the one from my back pocket. I yanked one drapery cord from the window, and by the time I got her hands tied, she was starting to wiggle.

By the time I yanked down another cord and started on her feet, she was wide awake.

I stood up, pulled her skirts down to cover her legs, and said, "Now relax. Nobody's going to hurt you."

Her breath was whistling through her nose, and her eyes above the gag were frantic. You could see the cords stand out in her neck from her silent efforts to scream. She was one scared cookie. Well, let her be scared. She'd sure scared the daylight out of me.

I found the typewriter in the bedroom.

The letters didn't match.

I went back into the living room, and her neck promptly corded up

in a scream you couldn't even hear across the room. I'd found a roll of wide adhesive tape in the bathroom, and now I tore off a strip, and knelt down beside her.

"I want to ask you some questions, so I'm going to take off the gag; but first I want your promise not to scream. How about it?"

The eyes just stared at me.

"Nod your head if you agree."

She nodded hard enough to shake her brains loose.

I took the gag out of her mouth.

"Please don't kill me! Please! I didn't mean it about the cops. I don't want the money, you keep it, I don't want it!"

"Cut it out. Nobody's going to kill you. I asked you if you had a typewriter, and you said 'You too'. What did you mean by that?"

"Eldie was here yesterday with that same note, and he typed the first line on my typewriter. He was like crazy, said somebody had stolen a hundred and seven thousand dollars from him. The first thing I thought of was you, and I said so. He turned my place upside down searching, then he stormed out, and I suppose he went to you. How else would you have that note—" She'd been shovelling it out so fast the words were all run together like a record being played too fast; but now she cut it off like somebody had slapped her in the mouth. You wouldn't have thought a face could get more scared, but hers did. "*You—you didn't kill Eldie too?*"

"No. I didn't kill him. And I'm not going to kill you."

She stared at me. She seemed suddenly exhausted.

"Has Otto Greck got a gun?" I asked.

"Yes."

"A big one?"

"A—A .38 I think he said."

That would be big enough. "Do you know where he was last night?"

"No."

"What did he say when you told him the money had been stolen."

"Nothing. Just cuss words."

"Did Shelwaite say how he got the note?"

"It was in the safe where the money had been."

"When did you learn about the apartment he was keeping over on Telegraph Hill?"

"Only the day Otto and I went down to San Jose to talk to you."

"Greck told you?"

"Yes. But I figured Eldie had one. He'd done it before."

"Why didn't Greck tell you sooner?"

"He said he only just found out himself." She was shaking badly now, the whites of her eyes showing, her voice coming out choked and ragged. "Please don't kill me. Please, please, please—"

"Cut it out. I'm not going to hurt you. I've got to leave you tied up, so you won't turn me in to the cops before I'm out of the building. But I'll call the clerk in an hour, and

tell him to come up here and let you loose."

There wasn't time to see Greck. There was no time for anything now, except getting away.

On the way to Santa Cruz I phoned Mrs. Shelwaite's apartment house, and the clerk sounded surprised at what I told him, so I guess she hadn't been discovered yet."

It was only a little after six when I drove into Capitola. I didn't want to go to Bernice's motel in daylight—the manager might notice me, and if she later linked me and Bernice and went to the police about it, our chances of getting away would drop right down to zero. I parked the car in some trees on a bluff overlooking the ocean, and settled down with my hat over my eyes like a tourist taking a snooze.

It was a long time before it got dark enough for me to move. I drove to a pay phone, and called my house.

"Hello." Just one word, spoken in a flat impersonal voice. I hung up.

I was now officially wanted for murder.

I parked my Ford half a block from Bernice's motel, and walked the rest of the way. There was a light in number six, and the shades were drawn. I didn't knock. I walked in.

The room was empty, the shower running in the bath room.

There was a pack of cigarettes on the dressing table; and I took one, lit it, and walked to the bathroom. The water stopped running, and I said:

"Don't be scared. It's me, Pete."

"Oh." Her head, with a green shower cap, and water on her face, showed at one end of the curtain. She wasn't scared. Her eyes searched my face soberly. "No luck, huh?"

"Worse than none."

"The police?"

"They're after me now."

"Oh." She stood that way a moment, nothing moving in her face. "Are we leaving?"

Then her face changed. The excitement came into it like an electric charge. I swear it, it was like lights went on in her eyes. She even gave an excited little laugh. "We've got to hurry. Hand me a towel."

I sat down and smoked my cigarette, and I was thinking about something that had been nagging me all afternoon. The timing of that note.

The note specified the exact amount of money, \$107,000, that had been in the safe; which seemed to indicate the note had been written after the thief stole the money. If you accepted that, then you had to suppose one of two things—either the thief had brought his own typewriter with him, or he had left the apartment and counted the money and written the note on his own typewriter and then returned to put the note in the safe.

It just didn't make sense.

Bernice came into the room, with a shiny blue robe wrapped around her, and she was taking off the shower cap. She sat down at the dressing table, and began to comb her hair. "What did you find in San Francisco?"

I told her about it, and she couldn't make anything of the business of the note either. She had finished with her hair, and now she stood up, moved toward the clothes on the bed, then stopped, her eyes searching my face again.

"What are our chances? Of getting away clean, I mean."

"I don't know."

"Fifty-fifty?"

"Maybe. Maybe two to one against. I don't know."

"We'll make it. Even at ten to one we'll make it. I've got a feeling."

"It'll be no picnic."

"I don't care."

"If we're caught, and if I take a fall for murder, you'll be an accessory."

"I don't care, I don't care, I don't care. Stop talking about it. You know I won't back out."

I looked at her, and I knew she wouldn't."

"And you now why, don't you, Pete?"

I knew that too. Her eyes said it, the way her smile had softened her whole face said it. "Because you're stuck on me."

"I am stuck on you, darling. Beautifully, wonderfully stuck on you."

"You know I can't give it back."

"Not now. Later."

And suddenly I got a look at myself. I'd been so deep in my own trouble up to now, that I'd scarcely thought of her except as my best chance for a getaway. What she'd have to pay for this prize boner—this business of throwing in with me—was something she didn't rate. It must have shown on my face, because she said:

"What's the matter?"

"I've changed my mind."

"About what?"

"You're not going with me."

"Don't be silly."

"You're not going." I stood up.

She beat me to the door, had it locked by the time I got there. She held the key behind her, and, believe it or not, she was still smiling.

"Give me the key."

"Nuh-uh."

"Good grief, don't you know I can take it away from you?"

"I'd scream. I'd fight. The police would come."

"You wouldn't do that."

Her smile was bright. "I would."

"Why?"

"Because if I can't have you, I don't care what happens to you."

And her smile never wavered.

I looked at her. She said, "Go on, smile. Your face won't crack."

I guessed I smiled.

"That's better."

"Not for you. Nothing's going to be better for you from now on."

"Then I'm still in?"

"You're in."

"That's nice." She unlocked the door, and went back to the dressing table. "Now face your chair to the wall, darling. I'm going to get dressed."

I sat and looked at the wall while she dressed, and I thought about how nice it was going to be for her from now on; but, hell, if that's the way she had to have it, who was I to complain? Besides, I knew she hadn't been kidding about turning me in. I quit thinking about it. I thought about that note.

"This is the part I hate the worst."

"Huh?" She'd been talking, but I hadn't been listening.

"The clothes. The sloppy, ugly clothes. Just look at them."

"What a bag."

"All right," she smiled, "I'm a bag. But you never forget what's really under these clothes. You hear?"

"I hear."

She walked over to me, and kissed me lightly on the mouth. "Just don't forget. That's all."

She kissed me again, hard. "And that's for luck."

It's funny how your mind works sometimes. Like it's in two pieces. We weren't talking about the note or the money; and with her kissing me, you wouldn't expect me to even be thinking about them. But it was like another part of my brain had been working on the puzzle all the time; and that was the exact instant when it started coming up with the

answer. It was like a clock had been turned on, and every tick was a fact falling into place.

I stared at Bernice, and I guess my jaw dropped open.

She said something, but I didn't hear it. I was listening to that clock. She looked at me kind of funny, and said it again:

"What's wrong?"

"You stole Shelwaite's money."

Her face went quite still, and she didn't say a word.

Boy, had I been dumb. "And you sure had me fooled, baby."

She still didn't speak, and the color had gone out of her face.

I said: "You wanted to eat your cake and have it too. You wanted to be shut of Shelwaite, but you wanted that dough too. And I thought you fell for that goofy disappearance scheme because you were too dumb to know any better. I was the dumb one. My scheme was the gimmick that handed you the dough on a silver platter."

"Please, Pete, let me—"

"You knew the dough was there, and you'd found out the combination of the safe, but if you stole it, he'd be right after you, might even sic the cops onto you. But if you were to walk out on him and then turn up dead—oho, that put you in the clear, automatically and completely. You had your key to his apartment, the combination to his safe, the police had him temporarily out of circulation—hell, it was a cinch, wasn't it?"

She just looked at me, not speaking.

"It was smooth and it was slick and it worked. My hat's off to you. You made one slip—putting the exact amount of money you knew was in the safe in that note you prepared beforehand. Only one little slip, and nobody'll ever figure out what it means because they all think you're dead."

"I made another one."

"What?"

"You. I love you."

"Then why did you kill him at my house? Hell, why kill him at all. There was no need to."

"I didn't kill him!" She sounded shocked.

"Like you didn't steal his dough. What happened? Did you go to my place last night, and find him there instead of me?"

"No, nothing like that. I swear I didn't kill him. *I swear it!*" She took my coat in her hands. "You've got to believe me. And you've got to see my side of the money thing too. I had to have it. I was sick and ashamed of the affair with Eldon Shelwaite, but with that money I could be secure. And the man I married would be secure too. I wanted that man to be you. I still want it to be you. Look—"

She hefted the smallest suitcase onto the bed, took a key from her purse, and opened it. "Look at it."

I looked, and it kind of took my breath away. Talking about a hundred and seven grand is one thing,

but seeing a case packed to the top with tens, twenties, and fifties is something else.

"It's ours now," she said. "Yours and mine."

"It sure isn't ours."

"But we need it. It makes your escape all the more possible."

"My escape!"

She put her hands on my arms, she looked me squarely in the eyes, and she said solemnly:

"I know this money makes you think I killed him, but I didn't. And I don't know who did. I love you, Pete. I'd never have put you on a spot like that."

I'm not God. I can't listen to a woman say she's innocent and know if she's lying or not. She must love me, all right—loaded with a hundred thousand dollars the way she was, yet still willing to string along with me, and take the bum end of the odds on losing the money and her freedom besides.

"You're what counts, Pete. We need the money to escape, but once we're free—if you say so—we'll send what's left of it back, or give it to charity, or whatever you say."

Even if she were guilty, the cops would never believe I wasn't in on the scheme. And if she were innocent—

"I didn't kill him, Pete."

Maybe she didn't. If not, that put me right back where I had been. The only thing that was changed was the escape. She was right: the money would make it easier.

"Say you believe me, Pete."

I didn't know what I believed, but I said, "I believe you."

"Thank God . . . Thank God." She put her forehead against my chest like she might be going to cry, but she didn't. She said in a muffled voice:

"I thought I wanted the money, and all the time it was you. I don't care about the money any more. We'll send back what's left—some way."

I let it go at that. But already, this early in the game, I knew something—we wouldn't send the money back. We'd talk about it from time to time, but we'd always find some excuse not to do it yet; and in the end, we'd never do it.

I patted her shoulder. "Let's get going."

"All right." She snapped the clasps on the money bag, and her face was lively and excited again. "We're going to make it. I know it."

Which shows you what a woman's intuition is worth, for that's the exact second the door opened.

No knock, it just opened and the man walked in.

Otto Greck.

And the first thing he did was reach into his armpit and come out with a gun. The second was to push the door shut with his heel.

"Going some place, folks?" With that sly, pimp's smile on his face.

Bernice abruptly sat down on the bed, like her legs wouldn't hold her up any more.

"Cozy." Greck looked around the room. "Good acoustics too."

"You—you've been listening to us?" That was Bernice.

"More than that, Bernice. I got a tape recording. Which suitcase is the dough?"

Neither of us said anything. Greck said, "Move over there next to the boy friend, sweetheart."

Bernice looked at me, back at him, then moved over to me. Greck un-snapped one suitcase full of clothes, then the case with all the money. His face went soft and pleased.

"Now ain't that pretty? I tailed you from Jewel's apartment—had a hunch you might lead me to the dough."

The gun was very steady, pointed at my stomach. He was about five feet from me. He reached into the case, and he threw several packages of the money onto the bed.

"For you, lovebirds."

I don't know what I'd expected, but it was anything besides that. I guess I'd forgotten he was a rat. Bernice said:

"You're not turning us in?"

"Me? I'm no cop lover. Let them do their own dirty work."

We digested that, and it was like a reprieve at the door of the gas chamber.

"In fact"—Greck closed the case, snapped the clasps with one hand—"I hope you make it. Not that you could make any trouble if you're caught. It'd be your word against mine, and yours ain't worth much.

It's neater this way. Less bother."

Bernice spoke with sudden energy. "We want a bigger split."

"Now look who's greedy."

"Pete, take the case away from him."

Greck stared at her. I stared too.

Greck said, "Honey, if Pete gets frisky, I'll put a slug in him."

"Then the police would come, and you wouldn't get any of the money."

Greck looked at her thoughtfully. "You got a way with words, Bernice. I listened to you talk this guy around, and it was slick." The brief, sly smile touched me, and went back to Bernice. "But this time you're just plain bluffing."

"But you can't afford to call it."

I took a step in his direction; and his face went hard and flat. He backed like a coiling snake. "Easy, buster. Easy."

We stopped, Bernice a couple of feet closer to him than I was. Bernice said:

"We want twenty-five thousand."

"I might go five."

I relaxed. Five would be all right. Bernice said, "Twenty," and her voice had relaxed too.

Greck moved the gun impatiently. "The hell with the haggling. Ten, and that's the limit. Otherwise, I'll let the cops have it. Jewel Shelwaite'll get it then; I'll marry her and get my share of this and all the other dough besides."

Bernice looked at me, and Greck said, "Speak up. Yes or no?"

Bernice didn't look at him. She looked at me, and her face wasn't relaxed like her voice; it was taut and excited, the eyes shining, and she slowly closed the eye Greck couldn't see. It hit me then, what she was going to do, and I tried to grab her, but she'd already made her move.

I didn't know anybody could move that fast. One instant she was looking at me, and the next she was swinging on the hand that held the gun, and spitting:

"Hit him, Petel *Hit him!*"

There wasn't time.

In the small room the explosion was deafening. Bernice and Greck stood frozen, she staring at him in an amazed, wondering way, and him staring back, scared speechless.

Then I hit him.

If I'd hit him any harder I'd have torn his head off.

He landed on the bed, went all the way over, flopped on the other side, and didn't move. Bernice was sitting on the floor now, the same stupefied look on her face.

The green blouse was smoked and powder spotted, and there was a hole in it. No blood yet. "He—shot—"

"Don't talk." I got her onto the bed, ripped open the blouse, and the bullet had gone in under her left breast. And the blood was coming now. God, how it was coming.

I tore off a strip of sheet, made a compress to tie over it, and it made

me sick to see how fast the red came up through it. Somebody knocked on the door.

"I yelled, 'Come in!'"

The door opened, and a dumpy, middle aged woman stood there. "I thought I heard—*merciful Heaven!*"

"Call an ambulance. And hurry."

She got out of there, and I tore another strip off the sheet. Bernice said in a weak, sighing voice:

"He—he—shot me."

"Don't talk." My God, wasn't there any way to stop all that blood?

"Am I going to—going to—"

"Don't talk. You're not going to die. Just don't talk."

"All right . . . Pete."

Greck was moving around a little on the floor. He finally got up on one arm, saw her on the bed, and mumbled, "—didn't shoot her. She grabbed the gun, yanked on it—couldn't get my finger out of the trigger guard—she yanked—that pulled the trigger."

Which was probably true, but if I'd had the gun in my hand, I might have shot him on the spot.

Finally the cop came.

"What's going on here?"

"She's been shot."

"Who shot her?"

"That guy."

"Wait a minute." Greck got up, rocking on his feet. "She tried to take the gun away from me, and it went off. That's all."

Bernice opened her eyes. "Wanna . . . make a statement."

"Don't talk," I said.

"A statement about what, miss?"

"I killed Eldon Shelwaite."

I could hear the ambulance coming now, wailing. I said:

"Don't talk. Save your strength."

The cop looked at the bloody bandage, her gray face. "She better talk now if she's going to."

Bernice said, "I went up to Pete's place to see Pete, and . . . Eldon was there . . . I knocked and he opened . . . the door, and he recognized me . . . I took gun out of my bag, and shot him in the head . . . Pete never knew a thing about it . . . Pete wasn't in on it all . . . I did it . . . just me . . . lost my head and shot him."

The cop asked some questions, but she didn't seem to hear them. Her eyes were closed again. Then the ambulance came, and the cop went outside to direct them, and Bernice opened her eyes, said in a sighing voice:

"I . . . had a hunch we'd escape. It's too bad . . . it couldn't be to . . . the same place."

I couldn't say anything. I put the back of my fingers against her cheek, and she smiled a little. It was awful to feel how cold her skin was. She was dead.

It was another two days before they decided I wasn't guilty of anything except tying up Mrs. Shelwaite; and, after all, she had threatened me with a gun. Anyway she didn't sign a complaint.

It was four in the afternoon when I got out, and Anna would be getting off work at the bank soon. But I didn't go there. I went to her house. Mama opened the door, and she looked at me uncertainly.

"Where is Papa?"

The wrinkled little face looked troubled, even a little afraid. "He is upstairs. He is sick."

She stood at the foot of the stairs and watched me walk up. I looked back from the head of the stairs, and she was still there, troubled, and a little frightened. I opened the door to Papa's room.

He was in bed, his face to me. The bottle of wine was on the nightstand, and the place stank of it. He looked sick all right. Fat and sick and half drunk, and he yelled:

"Whatta you doing here? You think Anna have anything to do with you now? Get away. Get outta my house!"

"You killed Eldon Shelwaite, Papa."

He opened his mouth and nothing came out. He stared at me and began to shake. I said:

"You went there to kill me, didn't you? Stinking drunk. One idea in that pea brain of yours—to keep me from marrying Anna. Shelwaite opened the door; he was about my size, with the light behind him you couldn't see his face, you thought he was me. You shoved the gun in his face and squeezed off."

"No, no, no! The Bernice woman killed him. She maka confession."

"She made the confession to save me. Shelwaite's car was parked outside my place. She knew that car as well as she knew her own. She'd never even have stopped her car, much less gotten out and knocked on the door. You killed him, Papa."

"You never prove nothing."

"You think this case is closed? Not on your life. They haven't got the gun that killed him, and they're plenty leery of deathbed confessions. If I took you down there and they sweated you for a few hours, they'd trip you up so many times you'd wind up in the gas chamber. And you know it."

"Don' do it, Pete!" he begged. "I'm a sick man. You're my own son-in-law." He was so scared he was gray. You could almost smell the fear.

"Then say it, Papa. Say you killed him!"

"Alla right, I kill him, but I don' know what I'm doing. I don' know a thing. 'At's the truth. I swear by —" He thrashed over to the edge of the bed and got to his feet and lurched out toward the bathroom. I stayed where I was, listening to him yank the door open and slam it behind him and jerk the bolt.

I was thinking about Anna. Just about her; nothing else.

Five full minutes dragged by, and then I went to the bathroom and rapped on the door. "Papa."

Just as I started to rap again I glanced down at the floor—and my answer was there, crawling

through the crack beneath the door.
Blood.

I hit the door with my shoulder. I must have hit it a dozen times before I realized I couldn't break it down. By the time I'd run next door and got an axe and broke into the bathroom, Papa's blood had spread half way across the corridor. I didn't even notice Mama standing out there, until I heard her body fall to the floor. I glanced at her. She was on her hands and knees, staring at Papa.

One look at him told me there was nothing anybody could ever do

for him now. He was ugly in death, as ugly as he had been in life. Uglier because of the razor gash in his throat and the worm-like white strings of fat that hung inside the gash. I turned and walked away from him, my mind already thinking of an excuse for Anna. He'd killed himself because he was sick, sick and despondent.

Behind me I heard Mama praying.

Mama knew. She'd known all along.

But she'd never tell Anna.

And neither would I.



THE MULE

BY MICHAEL ZUROY

Wallace and Thatcher had been partners for many years. They were hard-headed business men who knew how to make the most out of a bad situation.

THE chubby pleasant gentleman who had just seated himself in Roger Wallace's private office noted with appreciation the quality of the desk, the expensive massive chandelier, the deep rug and the other appointments in keeping with Wallace and Thatcher, Incorporated's substantial plant. To Wallace himself, the chubby gentleman said, smiling, "You've found the right man, sir. I've devoted a good part of a lifetime to my profession. My reputation is unmatched in certain select circles. Mind you, it's no simple matter, the manipulation of physical force, circumstances, timing—"

Wallace interrupted impatiently, "You don't have to sell me, Mr. Herman, I've checked you. Get on with

it." Wallace was a trim man in his fifties whose thick flaxen hair was showing shadows of gray.

Mr. Herman's smile turned off, then on again. "As you say, sir. Now, tell me, why do you want to eliminate Mr. Thatcher?"

"I don't see that that's your business. Your concern is only to get the job done."

Mr. Herman looked pained. He took a breath. "Mr. Wallace, I am no low-grade hired killer. I am a specialist. I produce accidental deaths, not suspicious murders. This is delicate and difficult work; I must have full background information to help me with the set-up. If you sincerely want an undisputed accident arranged for Mr. Thatcher—"

"All right," Wallace growled. "I

suppose it doesn't matter if I tell you. This business won't carry both of us any longer. Somebody's got to go."

Mr. Herman looked surprised. "A firm of this magnitude?"

"We're over-expanded. On the rocks. Thatcher's concerned with sales, he doesn't know how bad it is yet. I do, I handle the financial end, and I'm the only one who's got the overall picture. Our credit's exhausted; we'll be bust in a week."

"Dear, dear," Mr. Herman said.

"Thatcher and I own all the stock, fifty-fifty, in a closed corporation. If one of us dies, the survivor gets his stock. That's not an unusual legal clause, designed to keep a business from falling into unfamiliar hands."

"Thatcher's survivors?"

"Provided for, naturally. They get long-term bonds, which keeps them harmless. The point is, once I get Thatcher's stock, I can sell off enough to raise the funds the firm needs. I keep the balance."

"I see. You come out with a larger share of stock and a sound financial position."

"That's it. Now, how soon—"

Mr. Herman raised a hand. "I'd like to know more about your personal relations with Mr. Thatcher. Do you get along?"

"Certainly, or we wouldn't have been in business together for thirty-four years. But I don't see—"

"No history of trouble?"

"None—" Wallace hesitated.

"Well, not unless you want to go way back."

"Ah! The information is pertinent, sir, please tell me about it."

Wallace said crankily, "It was on account of a mule."

"A mule?"

"Yes, a mule." Wallace leaned back in his chair, looking upward as though watching time unreel. When he spoke again, it was with more absorption. "As young men, before we started this business, we did some gold prospecting once, Thatcher and I, having heard it was still possible to make a strike in the Death Valley section of the Mohave."

"With a couple of pack mules we'd wander around the desert for months, coming in once in a while to replenish our provisions. Didn't see a sign of gold all this time, but we kept on. The desert does cast a spell, and we liked the irresponsible life."

"Drifting in the ring of desert, one day, we came across this outcropping, this unbelievable reef of quartz, thick with dull yellow veins. The real thing, we knew it; somehow it had escaped the earlier prospectors. Maybe it had been hidden by shifting sands."

"We were looking at more money than we'd ever seen in our lives. The gold fever hit us, hard. We danced, we hooted like owls, we fired our revolvers. We didn't do a particle of work but with bright mad eyes speculated far into the night about our rich future."

"We dozed at last, but with the first morning light awoke and

grinned at each other, ready to start taking the gold. Then it hit us.

"Our mules were gone.

"We were a pair of prize fools. We'd been so delirious we'd forgotten the basic chores of securing and unpacking the mules, except for a couple of blankets. Tools, supplies, food and water were on those mules. You'd have to be hit by gold fever to understand our carelessness.

The thing is, the desert doesn't let you get away with being careless.

We walked widening circles around the camp, searching for the mules. The sun burned down, but we tried to conserve the little water left in our canteens. We were pushing too hard; exhaustion came. You don't fight the desert, you drift with it.

Giving up the search finally, we decided to head for Crucero. The Mohave isn't the Sahara, but it could be just as dangerous to the defenseless traveller, especially in those less developed days. The odds weren't good of our making Crucero, but there was an outside hope of stumbling on a water hole, or meeting others, or even running across the mules. The trouble was, we weren't actually experienced desert rats; our way had been to drift towards a destination haphazardly, but now time meant life.

We hated to leave the strike. We promised each other we'd be back, but neither felt too confident.

That sun was like a white lens, drawing the wetness out of us, burn-

ing our flesh. The broiling sands seeped into our boots, dragged at our feet. Endless sands, not even sage brush or cactus in this part of the Mohave.

The worst was when we finished what water we had. Our tongues and throats parched. Our strength drained as we plodded. When night came, we shivered on the desert floor, listening to the sands whispering, whispering about death for a couple of damned fools.

We couldn't even afford to sleep much, we had to keep moving during the cool of the night. Under the stars we staggered and under the blazing sunrise and into another scorching day. By afternoon, we were dessicated, all moisture sucked out of our bodies by the sun. On the horizon of weakness, we were at the point of dropping forever.

Then Thatcher pointed a shaking finger, and I saw one of the mules standing and watching us a score of yards away.

We were too far gone to rejoice. We simply looked at each other and started for the mule. The mule moved away. We stopped. It stopped. We called to it.

You know how mules are.

It wouldn't come.

We went after it again, and again it retreated. We stood still and it stood still.

We coaxed, implored, threatened, cursed. "Good mule, beautiful mule, best mule in the world," I crooned to it. "Come here, let me hug you,

mule. I swear, mule, I'll love you forever, if you'll come."

Thatcher snarled, "Come on, you pin-brained, repulsive, bow-legged blemish, you disgrace to your species—"

It wouldn't.

We stumbled after it. It moved off. We dragged faster. It went faster. We slowed. It slowed. We kept after it, weaving, holding on to each other, and the distance between ourselves and the mule remained unchanging.

Then our sluggish minds comprehended another fact, that the mule's packload was gone. It must have scraped it off. There was no sign of the other mule either. We never did see it again.

We accepted the disappointment dully. One truth remained. This mule was the only hope. It seemed strong, perhaps it had smelled out water. We were too weak to make it out of the desert ourselves, we needed that mule. Although we'd kept our revolvers on the chance of stray game, we discarded the idea of shooting at the mule for sustenance. In our condition, we'd probably miss and frighten it off for good.

So on we went, the mule, Thatcher and I. We were at the mercy of a mule, slaves to the silly beast.

The hellish afternoon dragged to a close and the shadows of the distant peaks lengthened and all our shadows grew long on the sands, and we followed that mule, always the same fixed distance away. We fell at times. Faces in the stinging

sands, we were ready to quit, but when we opened our eyes and looked, the mule was waiting, a beckoning of life, and we labored up and went on and the mule went on ahead.

The mule changed direction, taking us off course. We followed, uncaring. We were fixed to that mule.

We tried a concerted rush, if our teetering steps could be called that. The mule trotted away. We fell again. The mule stopped.

There came a stirring in my mind. I said, "Wrong."

Thatcher said, "What?"

"Thinking like humans. Catch mule, got to think like mule."

We looked at each other, breaking into sly grins. At this point, you understand, we were half demented. Thatcher croaked, "Right! Think like mule. How?"

I said, "Mule's contrary, right? Goes directly opposite to way we want. We been forgetting, there's two of us . . ."

Thatcher stared. His eyelid dropped in a cunning wink. "Sure. Two of us."

I said, "Got to get mule between us, see? Can't go directly contrary to both of us at same time. By mule logic, only one thing to do . . ."

We separated at once. Thatcher tottered to the left, I to the right, circling the beast, not advancing on it. Puzzled, the mule waited. When we had it between us, we began to close in.

The mule stood its ground, swivel-

ling its head to watch us alternately. We came closer and closer, and the mule still seemed puzzled as to how to move. We plunged the last few feet with grasping hands. It didn't break. We had it.

It was now that, facing Thatcher across the back of that mule, clarity returned to me and I realized for the first time what this situation meant. That mule could not possibly carry double to Crucero. One of us still had to die.

Looking into my sidekick's eyes, I made an instant decision, the only possible decision. I had to kill Thatcher for the mule.

We were inches apart. I began to slip my gun hand off the mule.

Then I realized that Thatcher's gun hand was sliding too. In his eyes, I saw the same decision, I saw icy blue murder.

The sound of human voices in the distance froze us. When we looked, we saw horses and men. A surveying party had run across us. We were all right now.

Afterwards, we were both ashamed of that tense moment and never discussed it. It would surely have split us up, but there was that gold strike—we had to go back into the desert together.

It took us months to locate that outcropping again. Those months patched our partnership as we learned that we were still a good team. We wouldn't die for each other, true, but then how many men would?

The gold we took out of that reef finally set us up for starting this mining-equipment business. Thirty-four years later, this is the result." Wallace waved at the spreading grounds and factory buildings visible through the window.

Mr. Herman had been listening attentively. He remarked now, "Illuminating. I thought there was something more behind your decision to eliminate Thatcher, an underlying reason for hostility. This is actually unfinished business, isn't it? You're in the same position now, aren't you?"

Wallace looked thoughtful, then replied, "Hadh't considered it that way, but you're right. Once, that mule couldn't carry us both. Now the business can't carry us both. All right, my decision's the same, let's wrap this up. What's your fee?"

"I have no set charge. What is it worth to you?"

Wallace scowled and drummed on the desk. "Five thousand."

Herman said, "Mr. Wallace, I wish you could appreciate the complexity that goes into the manufacture of a perfect accident, the delicacy of timing, the manipulation of forces, the human analysis, the camouflages and subterfuges, the secret difficult movements—"

"I don't give a tinker's damn for all that," Wallace said. "You want more, is that it? I'll make it eight thousand."

"Mr. Wallace, my accidents are impossible to detect. No officer of

the law has ever found anything but the hand of fate in my work. You may be positively assured that no trace can ever lead to you, certainly not through myself who has the most to lose. My reputation guarantees that—"

Wallace said, "Look, I told you, never mind the pitch, I'm a busy man. Let's say ten thousand. That ought to be enough."

"It's enough," Mr. Herman said. "Yes, ten thousand is good."

"All right, now when?"

"No later than tomorrow." Mr. Herman rose and said, with his pleasant smile, "Good day, sir."

The following day, Mr. Wallace waited in his office for news. In the afternoon, the phone rang. It was Mr. Herman. "Hello, Mr. Wallace, are you alone at your desk, can I talk freely?"

Wallace said, "I'm alone here. The switchboard's cut off the line. Go ahead."

Mr. Herman said, "Well, sir, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I've decided not to take the job."

"What's that?"

"I gave you no definite commitment, remember."

"It was my impression that you had."

"I simply expressed an objective opinion that ten thousand was ade-

quate. You will agree that twenty thousand is better."

"Now, look, if you're trying to hold me up . . ."

"Not at all. I've already accepted Mr. Thatcher's offer."

"Thatcher's offer—?"

"After I saw you, I contacted Mr. Thatcher and discussed the situation with him."

"You what?"

"A fine, courteous gentleman, Mr. Thatcher. Appreciative of my professional achievements; never once interrupted me. A pity that your manners are so different from his, if you don't mind my saying so."

"Look here—"

"That story about the mule was a great help. It convinced me that Mr. Thatcher would also be willing to engage my services, once he knew the situation; so I explained it to him. He felt, as you did, that somebody had to go."

"You won't get away with this, Herman," Wallace bit out.

"My condolences, sir," Mr. Herman said, clicking off.

"Herman!" Wallace shouted into the phone. "Herman! The wire was dead. "Try anything on me and you'll be sorry," Wallace said.

He slammed the receiver down, and the massive chandelier above dropped and crushed his head.



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